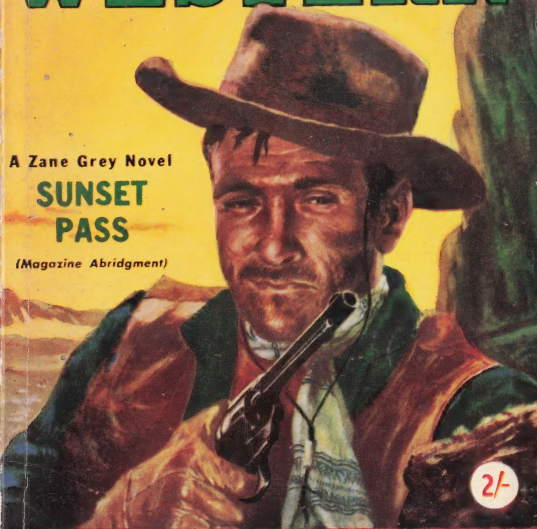




Zane Grey's

No. 22

WESTERN



A Zane Grey Novel

SUNSET PASS

(Magazine Abridgment)

2/-

MAN HUNT

GEORGE C. APPELL



CHUCKWAGON KING

By S. Omar Barker

The cook's a homely mossy-horn, his clothes ain't much for neat,
But he's the main high horny toad, at fixin' stuff to eat!
His brand of beef and biscuits is the best you ever ate,
His coffee's black, the beans he boils don't rattle in the plate.
He used to be a cowpoke in the days when he was young,
But now his gizzard ails him and his ridin' joints are sprung.
His ways are purty cranky, but the boys don't say a thing,
For at the ol' chuckwagon he's the undisputed king.
He cooks and drives the wagon while the cowhands make a work,
And though, beneath his rawhide, softer feelings maybe lurk,
He never does parade 'em, and the buckaroo is brave
Who, even at a distance, hangs around to watch him shave!

Chuckwagon days are passing out upon the Western range,
With pick-up trucks and sandwiches to emphasize the change,
But where there's still a wagon on the roundup in the spring,
You'll find a *cocinero* who is still chuckwagon king—
A king whose crown's a weathered hat, whose garb ain't much for neat,
But one whose beef and biscuits will be mighty hard to beat!



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN

No. 22

NOVEL (magazine abridgment)

Sunset Pass

Zane Grey 2

SHORT NOVELETTE

Death for a Brave

Walt Sheldon 100

SHORT STORIES

The Sudden Silence

William Heuman 94

Stampede Smell

Will C. Brown 112

Man Hunt

George C. Appell 118

FACT FEATURE

Bullet Lead and Book Learnin'

Harold Preece 84

VERSE

Chuckwagon King

S. Omar Barker

Inside front cover

WESTERN QUIZ

Famous Chiefs—What Tribes?

The Sage of Sapello 83

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True Rock had two choices. He could leave town and lose the girl he loved or stay and kill her brother. Either way he stood to lose.



Sunset Pass

by Zane Grey

CHAPTER ONE *True Rock Returns*

THE dusty overland train pulled into Wagon Tongue about noon of a sultry June day. The dead station appeared slow in coming to life. Mexicans lounging in the shade of the platform did not move.

Trueman Rock slowly stepped down from the coach, grip in hand. He had

the look of a man who expected to see someone he knew. He walked down the platform without anyone taking more than a casual glance at him.

Across the wide street stood a block of frame and brick buildings, with high weatherbeaten signs. It was a lazy scene. A group of cowboys occupied the corner; saddled horses were hitched to a rail; buckboards and wagons showed farther down the street; Mexicans in colourful

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garb sat in front of a saloon with painted windows.

He deliberately turned to enter the saloon. The same place, the same bar, stained mirror, and faded paintings, the same pool tables. Except for a barkeeper, the room was deserted. Rock asked for a drink.

"Stranger hereabouts, eh?" inquired the bartender.

"Yes, but I used to know Wagon-tongue," replied Rock. "You been here long?"

"Goin' on two years."

"How's the cattle business?"

"Good, off an' on. Some trade in beef."

"Beef? You mean on the hoof?"

"No. Butcherin'. Gage Preston's outfit do a big business."

"Well, that's new," replied Rock, thoughtfully. "Gage Preston? Heard his name somewhere."

Several booted men stamped in and lined up before the bar. Rock went out.

He went to the Range House, a hotel on another corner. He registered, gave the clerk his baggage checks, and went to the room assigned him, where he shaved and made himself presentable.

"Sure would like to run into Amy Wund," he said, falling into reminiscence. "Or Polly Ackers. Or Kit Rand. All married long ago, I'll bet."

He went downstairs to the lobby, where he encountered a heavy-set ruddy-faced man, no other than Clark, the proprietor, whom he well remembered.

"Howdy, Rock! Glad to see you. I seen your name on the book. Couldn't be sure till I'd had a peep at you."

"Howdy, Bill!" returned Rock, as they gripped hands.

"Wal, you haven't changed any. How long since you left Wagon-tongue?"

"Six years."

"Wal, so long as that? Time shore flies. We've growed some, Rock."

"I'm right glad, Bill. Always liked Wagon-tongue."

"Did you jest drop in to say hello to old friends, or do you aim to stay?" inquired Clark. "I hope you ain't looking for someone?"

"Reckon not, Bill. But there might be someone lookin' for me. How's my old friend, Cass Seward?"

"He's been daid these two years. He was a real sheriff, Rock, an' a good friend of yours."

"Cass was a good fellow all right. What ailed him, Bill?"

"Nothin'. He cashed with his boots on."

"Who killed him?"

"Wal, that was never cleared up for shore. The talk has always been that Ash Preston killed Seward. But nobody ever tried to prove it."

"Who's Ash Preston?"

"He's the oldest son of Gage Preston, an' as bad a hombre as ever forked a hoss. I ain't sayin' any more, an' please regard that as confidence."

"Certainly, Bill," replied Rock, hastily. After some casual conversation they parted in the hotel lobby.

Sitting there in a chair, he recalled friends and enemies of the old Wagon-tongue days. One of his best friends had been Sol Winter. Whenever Rock got into a scrape, Sol was the one who helped him out of it. Rock thought he recalled a debt still unpaid. With that he sallied out to find Winter's store.

Finally he located the corner where Sol's place of business had been. A large and pretentious store now occupied this site. Rock stalked gayly in, only to learn that Sol Winter did not occupy this store.

Through inquiry, he located Sol Winter's store at the end of the street. It was not what it had once been. Rock entered. Sol was waiting upon a woman. He looked older, thinner, grayer, and there were deep lines in his face that seemed strange to Rock. Six years was a long time. Rock gazed round him.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?" inquired a voice at Rock's elbow. He turned to find Winter beside him.

"Howdy, Sol, old-timer!"

Winter leaned a little, his eyes piercing. Suddenly his face loosened into a smile.

"True Rock!" he shouted incredulously. "If it ain't really you! Why, you ole ridin', drinkin', shootin', love-makin' son of a gun!"

"Glad to see me, Sol?"

"Glad? Why, True, you were always like my own boy. An' since I lost him—"

"Lost him! What you mean?"

"Didn't you ever hear about Nick? Nick was shot off his hoss out near Sunset Pass."

"Aw—no! Sol! My God! I'm sorry," exclaimed Rock huskily, as he wrung Winter's hand. "But it was an accident?"

"So they say, but I never believed it."

Here a customer entered, and Rock was left to himself for the moment. Nick Winter dead! The last thing Rock would have expected was that anyone could do violence to gentle, kindly, crippled Nick Winter.

"True, it's good to see you," said Winter, returning to place a hand on Rock's shoulder. "I never saw you look so well. I don't need to be told you've worked hard."

"Yes, Sol. I've been five years on a cattle job in Texas. Cleaned up ten thousand, all honest and square."

"No! Ten thousand? Why, True,

that's a small fortune! Don't get drunk an' begin to gamble!"

"Well, Sol, maybe I won't. But I've gone straight so long I'm worried. How much do I owe you?"

"Owe me? Nothin'," replied Sol.

"Look over your books before I hand you one." Rock helped Winter find the old account, which was not small, and forced him to accept payment with interest.

"Say, Rock, to be honest, this little windfall will help a lot," declared Winter. "I got in a cattle deal some time past an' lost out pretty much in debt. Then the new store—Dabb's—ate into my trade. I had to move. Lately, though, my business has picked up."

"That's good. Who'd you go in cattle deals with?" rejoined Rock.

"Dabb."

"Dabb? Not John Dabb who ran things here years ago?"

"Yes, John Dabb."

"Well, Sol, you ought to have known better."

"Sure. But it seemed such a promising deal—"

"Tell me some more bad news," said Rock gloomily. "What's become of my old girl, Kit Rand?"

"Kit married Chess Watkins—"

"What! That drunken loafer?" interrupted Rock indignantly.

"Yes, an' she couldn't change him, either. They left Wagontongue. Never heard of them since."

"How about Polly Ackers?"

"Polly went to the bad," returned Sol, gravely. "Small flash gambler got around her. She's been gone for years."

Rock groaned. "How about my best girl, Amy Wund?"

"Worse an' more of it, True," rejoined Winter. "After you left, Amy played fast an' loose with many a puncher.

She broke the hearts of all the cowboys on the range—an' then up an' married John Dabb. He was a widower with a daughter 'most as old as Amy. They were married a year or so ago. Amy is not happy an' she flirts as much as ever."

Rock dropped his head.

"Son, it's the way of life," went on Winter.

"Sol, will you keep my money till I come askin' for it?" queried Rock, with his hand inside his waistcoat.

"Now what're you up to?"

"I'm goin' out and get terrible drunk," declared Rock.

"Please don't, son. It'll only fetch back the old habit. You look so fine, I'd hate to see you do it."

"I'm goin' to drown my grief, Sol," declared Rock, solemnly.

"Well, wait till I come back," returned Winter. "I've got to go to the station. My clerk is off today. Keep store for me, like you used to."

"All right. I'll keep store. But you rustle back here pronto."

Winter hurried out, bareheaded and in his shirt sleeves, leaving Rock sitting on the counter. If Sol did not hurry back—

A light quick step arrested the current of Trueman's thoughts. He looked up. A girl had entered the store. His first swift sight of her caused him to slip off the counter. She looked around expectantly, and seeing Rock she hesitated, then came forward.

"Is Mr. Winter in?" asked the girl, pausing before the counter.

"No. He had to go to the station. Reckon he'll be there quite some time."

"Oh—I'm sorry. I—I can't wait, and I wanted him particularly."

"Can I do anythin' for you?"

"Are you the new clerk Mr. Winter was expectin'?" she queried.

"Yes, miss, at your service."

"I've quite a list of things to get," she said, opening a handbag.

"I'll do my best, miss. But I'm a little new to the business."

"That's all right. I'll help you," she returned, graciously. "Now where is that paper?"

The delay gave Trueman opportunity to look at her covertly. She was thoroughbred Western, about twenty-one, blond, with fair hair more silver than gold. She wore a faded little blue bonnet not of the latest style, and her plain white dress, though clean and neat, had seen long service.

"Here it is," she said, producing a slip of paper and looking up somewhat flushed. Her eyes were large, wide apart, gray in color. Rock looked into them. "Now, shall I read the list off one at a time or altogether?"

"Well, miss, it really doesn't—make any difference," replied Trueman vaguely, gazing at her lips. They were sweet and full and red, and just now curved into a little questioning smile.

"Very well—the groceries first," she said, consulting her list. "Five of sugar, five of rice, five—"

"Five what?" interrupted Trueman with alacrity, moving toward the grocery department. It ought to be easy, if he could keep his eyes off her.

"Five what?" she echoed. "Did you think I meant barrels? Five pounds."

"Sure. That's what I thought," replied Trueman hastily. "But some people buy this stuff in bulk. I used to."

"Oh, you were not always a clerk, then?"

"Oh, no! I've been a—a lot of things."

Rock found the sugar and had almost filled a large sack when she checked him: "Not brown sugar. White, please."

There was something in her tone that

made Rock wonder if she were laughing at him. He filled a large paper bag with white sugar.

"But you didn't weigh it," she said.

"I never weigh out small amounts," he returned blandly. "I can guess very accurately."

"There's more than five pounds of sugar in that bag," she protested.

"Probably a little. Sure I never guess underweight." He laid the bag on the counter. "What next? Oh, the rice."

"Can you guess the weight of rice, too?"

"Sure can. Even better. It's not near so heavy as sugar." And he filled a larger bag. In attempting to pass this to her he accidentally touched her bare hand with his. The soft contact shot a thrilling current through him. He dropped the bag. It burst, and the rice poured all over the floor.

"There—you've done it," she said, aghast.

"Excuse me, miss. I'm sure awkward this day. But that might be a good omen. Spillin' rice might mean a wedding."

She spoke up with spirit. "It couldn't, so far as I'm concerned. Of course I don't know your affairs. But you are wasting my time. I must hurry. They'll be waiting."

Rock humbly apologized and proceeded to fill another bag with rice. The he went on with the order, and for several moments, in which he kept his eyes averted, he performed very well as a clerk. He prayed that Sol would not come back soon.

He stole a glance at her left hand. Ringless! Rock wondered if she rode a horse. Did he dare ask her? Rock's usual audacity and adroitness with the feminine sex were wanting here.

"That's all the groceries," she said.

"Now I want buttons, thread, calico, dress goods, linen and—"

At the dry-goods counter Rock was in a quandary. He could not find anything. The young lady calmly walked behind the counter.

"Can't you read?" she inquired, pointing at some boxes.

"Read!" exclaimed Trueman, in an injured tone. "Sure I can read. I went to school for eight years. That's about four more than any cowpuncher I ever met."

"Indeed! No one would suspect it," she returned demurely. "If you're a cowboy, what're you doing in here?"

"I just lately went to clerking," he hastened to reply.

"Show me the buttons. There—in the white boxes. Thank you."

While she bent over them, looking and assorting, Trueman feasted his eyes on the little stray locks of fair hair that peeped from under her bonnet, on the small well-shaped ear, on the nape of her neck, beautiful and white, and upon the contour of cheek.

"It isn't pearl?" she inquired, holding a button in her palm.

"Sure is," he replied dreamily.

"That pearl!" she exclaimed, looking up. "Don't you know bone when you see it?"

"Oh—the button! I wasn't lookin' at it. Sure that's bone. If you want pearl buttons, maybe I can help." And he bent over the box until he felt one of those stray silky locks of hair brush his cheek.

She felt it, too, for she drew away. "Thank you. I can help myself. You find the thread."

It turned out that she had to find the thread, too, and then asked for a certain kind of dress goods, utterly foreign to him, and which she had to locate herself.

"How much of this?" asked Rock, stripping off yards of the soft material.

"Five. And I want it cut on the bias," she returned.

"On the bias," he echoed. "Oh, sure." He went at the task desperately. He had not progressed very far when she interrupted.

"Stop! You'll ruin it. That's not the way I want it cut," she cried. She brushed him aside, and taking up the shears began carefully to cut the material.

"I'm sorry," spoke up Rock, contritely. "I'm not usually so dumb. But you see I never before waited on such a— a girl as you."

She shot him a glance not wholly doubtful or unforgiving. Meeting his eyes caused her to look down again with a tinge of color staining her cheeks.

"I'm not a clerk. Good heavens! If the gangs I've ridden with would drop in here to see me—doin' this. Whew! My name is Trueman Rock. I'm an old friend of Sol Winter's."

"Trueman Rock?" she repeated, almost with a start, as she swiftly lifted big, questioning, surprised eyes.

"Yes. I used to ride this range years ago. I've been gone six years—five of which I've spent in Texas, workin' hard and—well, I'd like you to know, because maybe you've heard talk here. Workin' hard and goin' straight. I sold out. Somethin' drew me back to Wagon-tongue. Got here today, and when I ran in to see Sol he left me here in charge of the store. Said no one would come in, but if someone did to wait on him. Well, as you see, *someone* did come in. I'm sorry I've annoyed you—kept you waitin'. But it was Sol's fault. Only I should have told you first off."

"You needn't apologize, Mr. Rock,"

she replied shyly. "There's no harm done, except to the rice."

"I'm not so sure of that," he returned coolly.

"Please wrap these for me," she said, pushing the cut goods along the counter; she did not look up.

Elaborately Trueman wrapped those parcels.

"Charge to Thiry Preston," she said.

He found a pencil near at hand, and bending over a piece of wrapping paper, very business-like, he inquired, "Miss Thiry Preston?"

"Yes, Miss," she replied.

"What place?" he went on.

"Sunset Pass."

"Way out there?" He glanced up in surprise. "Sixty miles. I know that country—every waterhole, stone, bunch of cactus, and jackrabbit."

She smiled fully for the first time, and that smile further fascinated Rock. "You were well acquainted, weren't you?"

"I expect to renew old acquaintances out there. And I may be lucky enough to make new ones. What instructions about these parcels?"

"None. I'll carry them."

"Carry them! All this heavy load? Thirty pounds or more!"

"Surely. I'm quite strong. I've carried far more."

"Where to?"

"Out to the corral. Our buckboard is there. They'll be waiting and I'm late. I must hurry." In rather nervous haste she took up the several light packages and moved toward the other counter.

Rock got there first and intercepted her. "I'll carry these."

"But you shouldn't leave the store," she protested.

Fortunately, at this juncture Sol Winter hurriedly entered. "Well, now,

what's this?" he queried, with broad smile. "Thiry, to think you'd happen in just the wrong minute."

"Oh, Mr. Winter, I didn't miss you at all," returned Thiry, gayly. "Your new clerk was most obliging and—and capable—after I found the things I needed."

"Hal! Hal! He's shore a fine clerk. Thiry, meet True Rock, old friend of mine."

"Ah—I remember now," she flashed. "Is Mr. Rock the rider who once saved your son Nick?"

"Yes, Thiry," he replied, and turning to Rock he added, "Son, this lass is Miss Thiry Preston, who's helped to make some hard times easier for me."

"Happy to meet you, Miss Preston," beamed Rock, over his load of bundles.

"How do you do, Mr. Rock," returned Thiry, with just a hint of mischief in her gray eyes.

They went out together and Trueman felt that he was soaring to the blue sky. He kept turning to her to say things about the heat, the dust, and what not, when he only wanted to look at her.

They soon reached the end of the street and started across an open flat toward the corrals.

"You're in an awful hurry," finally complained Trueman.

"Yes, I am. I'm late, and you don't know—"

"This load is heavy. You'd never have packed it," declared Trueman. Slyly he pinched a hole in the bag of rice and it began to spill out in a thin stream. "There! We've rushed so we've broken the sack," he went on. "And it's the rice, too! Miss Thiry, it's an omen."

"Mr. Rock, I fear you are many things besides a clerk," she said, shaking her head sadly. "Here, let me take the

bag. I'll turn it upside down. If I had far to go with you I'd have no groceries left."

"But wouldn't it be great *if* we had farther to go?" he asked.

"I can't see that it would," she replied dubiously. "Especially if my dad was at the end of the walk."

"Your dad. Is he a terror?"

"Indeed he is—to boys who come gallivanting after me."

By this time they had reached the first corral. The big gate swung ajar. The fence was planked and too high to see over. Loud voices and thud of hoofs came from somewhere, probably the second corral. Thiry led the way in. Rock espied some saddle horses, a wagon, and then a double-seated buckboard hitched to a fine-looking team of roans.

"Here we are," said the girl, with evident relief. "Put the bundles under the back seat, Mr. Rock."

He did as directed, and then faced her, not knowing what to say.

"After all, you've been very kind—even if—"

"Don't say if," he broke in, entreatingly. "Don't spoil it by a single if. It's been the greatest adventure of my life."

"Of many like adventures, no doubt," she replied.

"I've met many girls in many ways, but there has never been anything like this," he returned.

"Mr. Rock!" she protested.

Then a clink of spurs, slow steps, and thuds of hoofs sounded behind Rock. They meant nothing particular to him until he saw the girl's color fade and her face turn white. A swift shadow darkened the great gray eyes.

"Hyah she ish, Range," called out a coarse voice. "With 'nother galoot, b'gosh! Shecond one terday."

Slowly Rock turned on his heel. Two

riders had entered the corral. The foremost, who was in the act of dismounting, was partly drunk. He was tall, lean, lithe, with a handsome red face, eyes hot as blue flame, and yellow hair that curled scraggily from under a dusty black sombrero. He had just been clean-shaved. Drops of blood and sweat stood out like beads on his lean jowls and his curved lips. A gun swung below his hip.

The other rider, called Range, was a cowboy, young in years, with still gray eyes like Miss Preston's, and intent, expressionless face, dark from sun and wind.

"Thiry, who's thish?" queried the other rider, dropping his bridle and striding forward.

"I can introduce myself," struck in Rock coolly. "I'm Trueman Rock, late of Texas."

"Hell you shay!" returned the other. "Whash you doin' hyar?"

"Well, if it's any of your business, I was in Winter's store and packed over Miss Preston's bundles," replied Rock.

"Haw! Haw!" guffawed the rider derisively. "Wal," swaggering closer to Rock, "run along, Big Hat, 'fore I reach you with a boot."

"Ash! You're drunk!" burst out the girl.

This rider, then, was Ash Preston, of whom Rock had heard significantly that day. Her brother!

"Whosh drunk?" queried Preston placatingly, of his sister. "Your mistake, Thiry."

"Yes, you are drunk," she returned with heat. "You've insulted Mr. Rock, who was kind enough to help me carry things from the store."

"Wal, I'll help Mishter Rock on his way," replied Preston, leering.

Range, the other rider, like a flash leaped out of his saddle and jerked Preston's gun from its sheath. "Ash, you look out," he called sharply. "You don't know this fellar."

CHAPTER TWO

Rock Makes a Decision

"WHASH the hell I care? He's Big Hat, an' I'm a-goin' to chase him pronto."

"Please, Ash, be decent if you can't be a gentleman," begged Thiry.

For an answer Preston lurched by Thiry and swept out a long slow arm, with open hand, aimed at Rock's face. But Rock dodged, and at the same time stuck out his foot. The rider, his momentum unchecked, tripped and fell slowly, helplessly, and striking on his shoulder, rolled over in the dirt. He sat up, ludicrously, and wiping the dust off his cheek he extended a long arm, with shaking hand, up at Rock. "Shay, you hit me, fellar."

"Preston, you're quite wrong. I didn't," replied Rock.

"Range, is thish hyar Big Hat lyin' to me?"

"Nope. You jest fell over him," returned the younger rider, laconically.

"Wal, stranger, I'm 'ceptin' your apology."

"Thanks. You're sure considerate," returned Rock with sarcasm. Turning to the girl, he said: "I'll go. Good-by, Miss Preston."

He strode back to Sol Winter's store.

"Now, son, what's happened?" queried Sol, with concern.

"Lord knows. I—don't," panted Rock, spilling off his sombrero and wiping his face. "But it's—a lot."

"True, you took a shine to Thiry Preston. I seen that. No wonder. She's

the sweetest lass who ever struck these parts."

"Sol, we'll investigate my state of mind last," replied Rock, ruefully. "Listen. I ran into the Preston outfit. At least, two of them. Thiry's brothers, Range and Ash." And he related to his friend all that had occurred at the corral.

"An' you took water from that Ash Preston?" mused Winter.

"I sure did."

"Son, it sounds good. If it isn't just excitement. Why, 'most every young fellar—an' some older ones—in this country have been struck by lightnin' when they first seen Thiry. But I can't see that it did them good. Thiry isn't to be courted, they say."

"Struck by lightnin'. Sure that might be it. But never you mind about me. I want to know all about this Preston outfit. You can trust me, I'm back here for good. I'll absolutely not give you any more trouble. I'm going to help you. So come out with everythin'."

"Same old Rock," mused Winter. "No, not the same, either. There's a difference I can't name yet. Wal, this Preston outfit is sure prominent in these parts. They call them 'The Thirteen Prestons of Sunset Pass.' It's a big family. Nobody seems to know where they come from. Anyway, they drove a herd of cattle in here some time after you left. An' 'ceptin' Ash Preston, they're just about the most likable outfit you ever seen. Fact is, they're like Thiry. So you don't need to be told more about that. They located in Sunset Pass, right on the Divide. An' it wasn't long until they were known all over the range. Wonderful outfit with horses and ropes."

"Go on, Sol. It's sure like a story to me. What was the trouble you had?"

"They ran up a big bill in my store. The old store, you remember. I taxed the boys about it. Well, it was Ash Preston who raised the hell. He wasn't drunk then. An', you don't need to be told that Ash is wild when he's drunk. When sober he's—well, he's different. Nick was alone in the store. Nick was a spunky lad, you know, an' he razed Ash somethin' fierce. Result was Ash piled the lad in a corner an' always hated him afterward. Fact is Ash Preston hates everybody except Thiry. She's the only one who can do anythin' with him."

"She didn't do a whole lot today. The drunken—! And Nick was shot off his horse out there in Sunset Pass?"

"Yes. An' I've never breathed to anyone my natural suspicion. I think Ash Preston must have killed Nick. They must have met an' fought it out. There were four empty shells, fresh shot, in Nick's gun."

"The boy had nerve and he was no slouch with a six-shooter. I wonder—"

"Well, Gage paid the bill first time he came to town. Then for a while he didn't buy from me. But one day Thiry came in, an' ever since I've sold goods to the Prestons. But none of them save Thiry have ever been in my store since. She does the orderin' an' she pays pronto."

"Abuh. Any range talk among the punchers about these Prestons?"

"Well, son, there used to be no more than concerned the Culvers, or Tolls, or Smiths, an' not so much as used to be about the little outfits down in the woods. You know the range. All the outfits eat one another's cattle. It was a kind of unwritten code. But, lately, I hear a good deal of complaint about the rustlin' of cattle. An' a few dark hints about the Prestons have seeped in to me off the range."

"Darn few, mind you, son, an' sure vague an' untrailable. It might be owin' to the slow gettin' rich of Gage Preston. It's a fact. He's growin' rich. Not so you could see it much in cattle, but in land an' money in bank. I happen to know he has a bank account in Las Vegas. That's pretty far off, you know, an' it looks queer to me. Found it out by accident. I buy from a wholesale grocer in Las Vegas. He happened here, an' in a talk dropped that bit of information. It's sure not known here in Wagontongue, an' I'm askin' you to keep it under your hat."

"Is Gage Preston one of these lone cattlemen?" queried Rock thoughtfully.

"Not now, but he sure was once."

"Who' he in with now?"

"John Dabb. They own the Bar X outfit. It's not so much. Dabb has the big end of it. Then Dabb runs a butcher shop. Fact is he undersold me an' put me out of that kind of business. He buys mostly from Preston. An' he ships a good many beeves."

"Ships? Out of town?" asked Rock in surprise.

"I should smile. They have worked into a considerable business, with prospects. I saw this opportunity years ago, but didn't have the capital."

Rock pondered over his friend's disclosures, and Thiry Preston's sad face returned to haunt him.

"Sol, what do you think about Ash Preston?" asked Rock.

"Well, son, I'm sure curious to ask you that same question," replied Winter. "How did this fellow strike you?"

"Like a hard fist, right in the eye," acknowledged Rock.

"Ahuh. I'm glad your sojourn in Texas hasn't dulled your edge," said Winter with satisfaction. "Rock, the Prestons are all out of the ordinary. Take Thiry,

for instance. How did *she* strike you?"

Trueman placed a slow heavy hand on the region of his heart, and gazed at his friend as if words were useless.

"Well, I wouldn't give two bits for you if she hadn't. Son, I've a hunch your comin' back means a lot. Wal, to go on—these Prestons are a mighty strikin' outfit. An' Ash Preston stands out even among them. He's a great rider of the range in all pertainin' to that hard game. He can drink more, fight harder, shoot quicker than any man in these parts. He's sure the meanest, coldest, nerviest, deadliest proposition you're likely to stack up against in your life. I just want to give you a hunch, secin' you went sweet on Thiry."

"Listen, old friend. There's only one thing that could stump me. Tell me. Do you know Thiry real well?"

"Yes, son, an' I can answer that question so plain in your eyes. Thiry is not in love with anybody. I know, because she told me herself, not so long ago. She loves her family, especially Ash. But there's no one else."

"That'll—help," replied Rock, swallowing hard. "Now, Sol, I'll sneak off alone somewhere and try to find out what's the matter with me—and what to do about it."

Trueman sallied forth into the sunlight like a man possessed. He did not notice the heat while he was striding out of town, but when he got to the cedars and mounted a slope to a lonely spot he was grateful for the cool shade. He threw aside coat and sombrero, and lay down on the fragrant mat of cedar needles.

Rock always went to the loneliness and silence of desert or forest when in any kind of trouble. He could think here.

Only one thing had stood in the way of a happy return to Wagontongue, and that had been possibility of a clash with Cass Seward, the sheriff. It had been reckless, perhaps foolish, for him to come back, when he had known that the probabilities were that Cass would try to make him show yellow and clap him in jail, because of a shooting affray which Rock had not started. But it had been Rock's way to come, not knowing; and that hazard was past. Rock paid tribute to the dead sheriff, and gladly welcomed the fact that he had a clean slate before him.

That gray-eyed girl, Thiry Preston! Here he did surrender. He had been struck through the heart. And then, one by one, in solemn procession, there passed before his memory's eye the other girls he had known, trifled with, liked, or loved. A few stood out brightly. He watched them pass by, out of the shade, it seemed, into the past forever.

Thiry Preston had made them vanish, as if by magic. Trueman did not sentimentalize or argue about it. She was the girl. All his life he had been dreaming of her.

This was not decision, but a realization and acceptance. Decision had to do with remaining at or near Wagontongue, and it was made the instant the question presented. He would ask Gage Preston for a job riding, and if one was not available he would ask some other cattleman.

At length Rock left the cedar nook and started to retrace his steps toward town and the hotel. A young woman, coming out of Dabb's large establishment, almost ran into Rock.

"Excuse me," he said, touching his hat.

"True—don't you know *me*?" she asked, with mingled reproach and gayety

"It's Amy."

"Why, Mrs. Dabb, this is a surprise!" he said, doffing his sombrero, and bowing over her hand. "I'm sure glad to see you."

"Mrs. Dabb? Not Amy?" she rejoined, with captivating smile and look Rock found familiar.

"Someone told me you were married to my old boss, John Dabb," said Rock easily. "You sure look well and fine. And prosperous, too."

She did not like his penetrating gaze and his slow, cool speech. "True, I can return the compliment. You are handsomer than ever."

"Thanks."

"True, you're not glad to see me," she rejoined petulantly.

"Why, sure I am! Glad you're settled and happy and—"

"Happy! Do I look that?" she interrupted bitterly.

"If my memory's any good you look as gay and happy as ever."

"Your memory is bad—about that—and other things. Trueman, have you come back on a visit?"

"No; I aim to stay. I always was comin' back."

"If you only had come!" She sighed and looked eloquently up at him. "I'm glad—terribly glad you're going to stay. We must be good friends again, True. You'll come to see me—ride with me—like you used to. Won't you?"

"I'm afraid Mr. Dabb wouldn't like that. He never had any use for me."

"It doesn't matter what he likes," returned the young woman impatiently. "Say you will, Trueman. I'm horribly lonesome."

Rock remembered that Amy had always been a flirt. Evidently she had not changed. He was sorry for her and wished to spare her discomfiture. "I'll call on

you and John sometime," he replied with all friendliness.

"Me and—John! Well, your long absence in Texas hasn't made you any brighter. I dare say it hasn't changed you any—about girls, either. I saw you with Thiry Preston. At your old tricks, cowboy!"

"Did you? I don't call it old tricks to carry a few bundles for a girl," replied Rock stiffly. It annoyed him to feel the blood heat his face.

"Bundles, rot!" she retorted. "I saw you through a window and anybody could have read your mind. Oh, I know you, True Rock, inside and out. You've lost your head pronto over Thiry Preston."

"I'm not denyin' it, am I?"

"You're flaunting it like a red flag right in my face. Well, I'm telling you, cowboy, that this once you've lost your head for nothing. Thiry Preston will have none of you. I know her. She is not your kind. She's cold as ice to every cowboy on this range. Heaven knows, they've run after her."

"Thanks for that last news, anyhow," he responded dryly.

Her eyes were keen with jealous intuition. "More. Thiry Preston has no use for lovesick cowboys, much less ones like you, who've been at the beck and call of every girl in the land. And she worships that handsome devil of a brother, Ash."

"I'd hold it a virtue for a girl to love her brother—whether he was bad or good. Good day, Mrs. Dabb." Replacing his sombrero he turned away, not, however, without catching a last angry blaze of her eyes.

She would be his enemy, of that he was full sure, unless he allowed himself once more to be attached to her train. The idea was preposterous. In a few

short hours he had grown past flirting with any woman.

Rock, instead of entering the hotel, returned to Winter, whom he found unoccupied, and proceeded to unburden himself.

"So you run into Amy," meditated Sol, with a thoughtful twinkle. "Wal, son, take my advice and keep shy of her. She's got old Dabb so jealous he can't attend to his business. She always has some buckaroo runnin' after her. That won't do for you. The Dabbs about own Wagontongue, not to say a lot of the range outfits. Sure John's brothers are ruled by him. I told you he bought beef from Gage Preston. Then I always see Thiry with Amy, when she comes to town. If you aim to snub your old girl for this new one—wal, son, you'll have a rough row to hoe."

"Sol, I'll not snub Amy, but I can't go playin' round with her. Sol, how much money do you owe?"

"Couple of thousand, an' when that's paid off I'll be on the road to prosperity again."

"Old-timer, you're on it right now. I'll take that much stock in your business," went on Rock, as he took out his pocket-book.

"Son, I don't want you to do that," protested Winter.

"But I want to. I think it's a good investment. Now here's your two thousand. And here's five more, which I want you to put in your bank, on interest, but fixed so you can draw it out quick. Reckon we'd better add another thousand to that five. I only need enough money for a spankin' outfit."

Winter shook his lean old head sagaciously. "Wal, son, out with it. What's under that big hat?"

"I'm going to be a plain cowpuncher and start in where I left off here six

years ago. I want a jimdandy outfit: two saddle-horses—the best on the range, if money can buy them.”

“We can find one of them pronto,” replied Winter with satisfaction. “After supper we’ll walk out to Leslie’s. He’s sellin’ out an’ he has some good stock. One horse in particular. I never saw his beat. Dabb has been hagglin’ with Leslie over the price. It’s high, but the horse is worth it.”

“How much?”

“Three hundred.”

“All right, Sol. We’ll buy. But I reckon one saddle-horse will do. Then I’ll need a pack-horse and outfit. In the mornin’ we’ll pick out a tarp and blankets, grub and campin’ outfit. I’ve got saddle, bridle, spurs, riata—all Mexican, Sol, and if they don’t knock the punchers on this range, I’ll eat them. And last, I reckon I’ll require some more hardware.”

“Ahuh! An’ with all this outfit you’re headin’ for Sunset Pass.”

“Yeah. I’m goin’ to ride down slow and easy-like. Then I’ll end up at Gage Preston’s and strike him for a job.”

“Son, it’s a bold move, if it’s all on account of Thiry. Gage Preston can’t hardly refuse you a job. He needs riders. He has hired about every cowpuncher on the range. But they don’t last. Ash gets rid of them, sooner or later. Reckon about as soon as they shine up to Thiry.”

“How does he do that?”

“Wal, he scares most of them. Some he has bunged up with his fists. An’ several punchers he’s driven to throw guns.”

“Kill them?”

“Nope. They say he just crippled them. Ash shoots quick an’ where he wants.”

“Most interestin’ cuss—Ash Preston,” said Rock lightly.

“Son, this is what worries me,” went on Winter with gravity. “It’ll be some different when Ash Preston butts into you. No matter how easy an’ cool you start—no matter how clever you are—it’s bound to wind up a deadly business.”

CHAPTER THREE

South to Sunset Pass

TRUEMAN ROCK was not one of the cowboy breed who cared only for pitching, biting, kicking horses. He could ride them, when exigency demanded, but he never loved a horse for other than thoroughbred qualities. And sitting on the corral fence watching Leslie’s white favorite, he was bound to confess that he felt emotions of his earliest days on the range.

“Wal, True, did you ever see the beat of that hoss?” asked Sol Winter for the twentieth time.

Rock shook his head silently. Then, “I’ll take him, Leslie, and consider the deal a lastin’ favor,” he said.

“Mrs. Dabb has been wantin’ this hoss, didn’t you tell me, Jim?” asked Winter.

“Wal, I reckon so. She has been out here often. But I don’t think Mrs. Dabb really cared about the horse so much. She just wanted to show off with him. But today there was a girl here who loved him, an’ I’d shore have liked to let her have him.”

“Who was she, Jim?” asked Winter.

“Thiry Preston. She passed here today with her dad an’ some of the boys. Gage stopped to have a talk with me.”

“What did Miss Preston do?” queried Rock.

“She just petted the hoss while the other Prestons walked around talkin’.

Miss Thiry never said a word. But I seen her heart in her eyes."

"Speaks well for her," replied Rock, as he slid off the fence and approached the animal. If this beautiful white horse had appeared desirable in his eyes upon first sight, what was he now? Rock smoothed the silky mane, thrilling at the thought that Thiry's gentle hand had rested there. "Leslie, I'll come out in the mornin'. I want a pack-horse or a mule. Here's your money. Shake on it."

"I'll throw the pack-hoss in to boot," replied Leslie.

"Sol," said Rock, thoughtfully, as they retraced their steps toward town, "do the Prestons come in often?"

"Some of them every Saturday, shore as it rolls around. Thiry comes in about twice a month."

"Queer how all about these Prestons interests me so," said Rock.

"Not so queer. Leavin' Thiry aside, they're a mighty interestin' outfit," returned Winter. "You'll find that so pronto."

"Reckon I'll find out a lot pronto," said Trueman. "Never could keep things from comin' my way, particularly trouble. But, Sol, in all my life no adventure I ever rode down on could touch this one. I'm soberin' a little and realize how crazy it seems to you."

"Not crazy, son," replied Winter earnestly. "It's wild, perhaps, to let yourself go over this girl all in a minute. But then, wild or no it might turn out good for Thiry Preston."

"Sol, why is her face so sad?"

"I don't know. I've asked her why she looks so sad—which you can see when she's not speakin', but she always makes herself smile an' laugh then. Says she can't help her face an's she's sorry I don't like it. Rock, it hurts Thiry, sort of startles her, to mention that.

It makes her think of somethin' unhappy."

"It's for me to find out," said Rock.

"You bet. I've always been puzzled an' troubled over Thiry. True, I may be wrong thinkin' you've growed to be a man—but one last word: these Prestons have heard all about you, naturally, an' when you ride out on the range it'll all come fresh again. No cowboy ever had a finer reputation than you—for bein' honest an' a wonder at your work. You never drank much, compared to most cowboys.

"But your gun record was bad. Every old-timer here knows you never went around lookin' for trouble. It's not that kind of a bad reputation. It's this kind: you've spilled blood on this range, often, an' more'n once fatal. That made you loved by a few, feared an' misunderstood by many, an' a mark for every fame-huntin' sheriff, gambler, an' cow-puncher in the country.

"Now the point I want to make is this: Preston knows most of this or will know it soon, an' if he keeps you in his outfit it will be pretty strong proof that these queer dark hints from the range are without justification."

"Sol, it would seem so," replied Rock meditatively.

"Wal, it'll be good if you find it that way. For Thiry's sake first, an' then for everybody concerned. Then these hints against Preston will be little different from those concernin' other ranchers."

Rock regarded his anxious friend a thoughtful moment. "Winter, you've made a point you weren't calculatin' on. You're *hopin'* I'll find Preston one of the common run of ranchers. But you're *afraid* I won't."

It was nearly noon the following day when Rock had his pack outfit ready

for travel. Leslie came up presently with the white horse.

"Black leather an' silver trimmings," said the rancher, admiringly. "Never seen him so dressed up. An' the son-of-a-gun is smart enough to know he looks grand."

"He's smart, all right," agreed Rock, with shining eyes. "Now we'll see if he'll hang me on the fence."

The white horse took Rock's mount easily, pranced and champed a little, and tossed his head.

"Good day and good luck, rancher," said Rock, lifting the halter of the pack animal off a post.

"Same to you, cowboy," replied Leslie, heartily.

Several hours' ride out of the town, Rock reached the top of a long slope and there halted the horses to spend a few moments in reveling in the well-remembered country.

A thirty-mile gulf yawned wide and shallow, a yellow-green sea of desert grass and sage, which sloped into ridge on ridge of cedar and white grass. The length of the valley both east and west extended beyond the limit of vision, and here began the vast cattle range that made the town of Wagontongue possible.

An hour's ride down the slow incline brought Rock into a verdant swale of fifty acres, fresh with its varied shades of green, surrounding a pretty ranch house. Here Adam Pringle had lived. If he were still there, he had verified his oft-repeated claims to Rock that here had been the making of a prosperous farm and cattle ranch.

The barn and corrals were closer to the road than the house. Rock saw a man at work under an open shed. It was Adam—stalwart, middle-aged, weather-beaten settler.

"True Rock, or I'm a born sinner!" shouted Pringle.

"Howdy, Adam!" returned Rock.

"How air you? Get down an' come in."

"Haven't time, Adam. I'm rustlin' along to make camp below. Adam, you're lookin' good. I see you've made this homestead go."

"Never seen you look any better, if I remember. Whar you been?"

"Texas."

"Whar you goin'?"

"Sunset Pass."

"Cowboy, if you want work, pile right off heah."

"Thanks, Adam, but I've got a hankerin' for wilder country. I'll try Preston. Think he'll take me?"

"Shore. But don't ask him."

"Why not?"

"I'm advisin' you—not talkin'," returned the rancher, with a sharp gleam in his eye. "You know me, True."

"Used to, pretty well, Adam. And I'm sort of flustered at your advisin' me that way," replied Rock, keenly searching the other's face.

"Stay away from Sunset Pass."

"Adam, I just never could take advice," drawled Rock. "Much obliged, though. How you doin'?"

"Been on my feet these two years," returned Pringle, with satisfaction. "Been raisin' turnips an' potatoes an' some corn. Got three thousand haid of stock. An' sellin' eight hundred haid this fall."

"Bully! I'm sure tickled. Losin' much stock?"

"Some. But not enough to rare about. Though I'm agreed with cattlemen who know the range that there's more rustlin' than for some years past. Queer rustlin', too. You lose a few haid of steers an' then you never hear of anyone seein' hide nor hair of them again."

"Nothin' queer about that, Adam. Rustled cattle are seldom seen again," returned Rock, for the sake of argument. But there was something unusual about it. "Many new cattlemen?" he went on.

"Not too many. The range is healthy an' improvin'."

"How's Jess Slagle? I used to ride for Jess, and want to see him."

"Humph! Didn't nobody tell you aboot Slagle? He couldn't make it go in Sunset Pass after the Prestons come."

"Why not? It's sure big enough country for ten outfits."

"Wal, there's only one left, an' that's Preston's. Ask Slagle!"

"I sure will. Is he located in the Pass?"

"No. He's ten miles this side. Stone cabin. You'll remember it."

"If I do, that's no ranch for Jess Slagle. Marshland, what there was of it fit to graze cattle, salty water, mostly rocks and cedars."

"Your memory's good. Drop in to see Slagle. An' don't miss callin' heah when you come out."

"Which you're thinkin' won't be so very long. Huh, Adam?"

"Wal, I'm not thinkin', but if it was anyone else I'd give him three days—aboot," replied Pringle, with a guffaw.

Rock's misgivings grew in proportion to the increasing warmth and pleasure of this ride toward old haunts. The fact that nothing was spoken openly detrimental to the Prestons was a singular feature that he had encountered once or twice before. The real Westerner, such as Pringle, was a man of few words. This reticence sprang from a consciousness that he was not wholly free from blame himself, and that to be loose with the tongue entailed considerable risk.

Toward sundown he reached the south slope of the valley and entered the zone of the cedars. These gray-sheathed trees, fragrant, with their massed green foliage and grotesque dead branches, seemed as much a part of a cowboy's life as grass or rocks or cactus. Rock halted for camp near a rugged little creek, where clear water ran trickling over the stones. He went off the road and threw his pack in a clump of cedars where he could not readily be seen.

He was on his way before sunrise the next morning, and about noon he halted before the stone cabin that he knew must belong to his old friend and employer, Jess Slagle. Rock rode into what was a sorry excuse for a yard, where fences were down and dilapidated wagons, long out of use, stood around amid a litter of stones and wood. It amazed and shocked Rock, though he had seen many cattlemen start well and never finish.

Dismounting, Rock went to the door and knocked. He heard steps inside. The door opened half a foot to disclose a red-haired, homely woman in dirty garb, more like a sack than a dress.

"Does Jess Slagle live here?" asked Rock.

"Yes. He's out round the barn somewhere," she replied, with a swift flash of beady eyes that took him in.

Rock thanked her and turned away. So Jess Slagle had come to squalor and poverty. Who was the woman? Rock certainly had no remembrance of her. Presently he heard the sound of hammer blows on wood, and he came upon Slagle at work on a pen beside the barn.

"Howdy, Rock! I knew you were in town. Range Preston rode by this mornin' an' passed the news."

This gaunt man was Slagle, changed

vastly, no doubt like his fortunes. He showed no surprise or gladness. Rock remembered him as a heavy, florid Westerner, with clear eyes, breezy manner, smooth of face, and without a gray hair.

"Jess, I'm sure surprised and plumb sorry to find you—your condition so—so different," began Rock, a little uncertain.

"Reckon that's natural. Not much like when you rode for me, years ago," replied Slagle, with the bitterness of the defeated.

"What happened, Jess? How'd you lose out?"

"Well, Rock, I had hard luck. Two bad years for water and grass. Then Dabb shut down on me. I held the little end of a deal with him. Next I sold some cattle, put the money in a bank, an' it busted. Then Preston moved into the country—an' here I am."

"How in the devil did you get here?" demanded Rock bluntly.

"Right off I made a mistake," returned Slagle, nodding his head. "Preston was keen about my ranch in the Pass. He made me a good offer. I refused. He kept after me. I had some hard words with his son, Ash, an' it all led to a breach. They kept edgin' my stock down out of the Pass an' I didn't have the riders to drive it back. That way, then, an' in others, I fell more in debt. No banks would give me credit. I had finally to sell for about nothin'."

"To Preston?"

"Sure. No one on the lower range would take it as a gift. It was a poor location, if any other outfit rode the Pass."

"Ahuh! Then as it stands, Preston about ruined you?"

"No, Rock, I couldn't claim that. My deal with Dabb hurt me most—started me downhill. Gage Preston never did

me any dirt that I actually know. When I went to him an' told him his outfit was drivin' my stock off grass an' water, he raised the very old Ned with his sons, in particular Ash Preston, who's sure rotten enough to taint the whole other twelve Prestons."

"What you mean by rotten?"

"Mebbe it's a poor word. But I know what I mean. Did you ever see a slick, cold, shiny rattlesnake, just after sheddin' his skin, come slippin' out, no more afraid of you than hell, sure of himself, an' ready to sting you deep? Well, that's Ash Preston."

"Ahuh! And that's all you mean?"

"Reckon it is, Rock. I've lost cattle the last five years, some hundreds in all. But so has Preston an' other ranchers, all the way from Red Butte to the sand. There's rustlin', more perhaps than when you helped us clean out the Hartwell outfit. But sure as I am alive I never laid any of it to Ash Preston."

"I see," rejoined Rock, studying the other's mask-like face. "Glad to get your angle. I'm goin' to ask Preston for a job."

"I had a hunch you were. I'm wishin' you luck."

"Walk out with me and see my horse, Jess," rejoined Rock, turning. "Do you aim to hang on here?"

"Thank God, I don't," replied Slagle, with a first show of feeling. "My wife—she's my second wife, by the way—has had a little money an' a farm left her, in Missouri. We're leavin' before winter sets in."

"Glad to hear you've had a windfall, Jess. Now what do you think of that white horse?"

Rock had been two hours leisurely climbing the imperceptible slope up to the mouth of Sunset Pass. It was mid-

afternoon. The clouds had broken somewhat and already there were tinges of gold and purple against the blue sky.

At last he entered the wide portal of the Pass, and had clear view of its magnificent reach and wild beauty. The winding Sunset Creek came down like a broken ribbon, bright here and dark there. The sentinel pines seemed to greet him.

They stood as he remembered, first one, isolated and stately, then another, and next two, and again one, and so on that way until at the height of the Pass they grew in numbers, yet apart, lording it over the few cedars on the level bench, and the log cabins strange to Rock, that he knew must be the home of the Prestons.

Many and many a time had he camped there, realizing and loving the beauty of that aloof spot, yet never had he imagined it as a site for a ranch. But it was indeed the most perfect situation of any he had ever seen. And it was Thiry Preston's home.

There were no rocks, no brush, no fallen logs or dead timber. Some of the cabins were weathered and gray, with moss green on the split shingles. They had wide eaves and sturdy gray chimneys built outside, and glass windows. Other cabins were new, especially a little one, far over under the overhanging green slope and near a thin pile of white water falling from mossy rock. The largest of the pines marked this little cabin, and towered over it protectingly.

Just then a hound bayed, deep and hollow, no doubt announcing the advent of a stranger in the Pass. Rock, having come abreast of the first cabin, halted his horse.

The door of this cabin opened. A tall, lithe, belted and booted man stalked

out, leisurely, his eagle-like head bare, his yellow hair waving in the wind—Ash Preston.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Thirteen Prestons

ROCK felt that seldom indeed had he been looked over as he now was by this Ash Preston. No hint of recognition in that live blue gaze!

"Howdy, stranger! Off the trail?"

The omission of the invariable Western "Get down and come in," was not lost on Rock. "Howdy to you!" he returned. "Is this Gage Preston's ranch?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm on the right track. I want to see him."

"Who're you, stranger?"

"I'm Trueman Rock, late of Texas."

"Rock—are you the Rock who used to ride here before we came?"

"Reckon I am."

Ash Preston measured Rock again, a long penetrating look that was neither insolent nor curious. "You can tell me what you want with Preston. I'm his son Ash."

"Glad to meet you," said Rock pleasantly, and that was true, even if he had to feign the pleasure. "Do you run Preston's business?"

"I'm foreman here."

"Reckon my call's nothin' important," returned Rock, easily. "But when I do call on a cattleman I want to see him."

"Are you shore it's my father you want to see most?" asked Ash, without the slightest change in tone or expression.

"Well, I'm callin' on Miss Thiry, too, for that matter," rejoined Rock. "But I'd like to see your father first."

"Miss Thiry ain't secin' every rider

who comes along," said Preston. "An' dad ain't home."

"You mean *you* say he isn't home to me?" queried Rock deliberately.

"Wal, I didn't expect you to take it that way, but since you do we'll let it go at that."

"Excuse me, Preston, if I can't let it go at that," he returned coolly. "Would you mind tellin' me if any of the other ten Prestons are home?"

There the gauntlet went in the face of Ash Preston. Still he did not show surprise. The intense blue of his eyes, steady on Rock, changed only with a fire. Whatever he might be when drunk, when sober as now, he was slow, cold, complex, cunning. He was flint, singularly charged with fire.

"Wal, Rock, all the Prestons are home, if you're so set on knowin'," returned Ash. "But there's one of the thirteen who's advisin' you to dust down the road."

"Reckon that must be you, Mister Ash?"

"An' that's shore me."

"Well, I'm sorry. I don't know you. And sure you don't know me. I can't ever have offended you. Why are you so uncivil?"

Preston's glance, straying over Rock, and the flashy saddle and beautiful horse, betrayed something akin to disfavor, but he did not commit himself further than to make a slight gesture, indicating the road down the Pass.

"Plain as print," went on Rock bluntly. "But I'll stay long enough, anyhow, to see if the rest of your family is as rude to a stranger as you are."

In one sliding step Rock reached the ground. And at that instant heavy boots crunched the gravel.

"Hey, Ash, who're you palaverin' with?" called a deep, hearty voice.

Ash wheeled on his heel, and without answer strode back into the cabin, to slam the door. Then Rock turned to see who had intervened. He saw a man of massive build, in the plain garb of an everyday cattleman. Rock perceived at once that he was father to Thiry and Range Preston, but there seemed no resemblance to Ash.

"Stranger, I reckon Ash wasn't welcomin' you with open arms," he said.

"Not exactly. You're Gage Preston?"

"Shore am, young man. Did you want to see me?"

"Yes, I asked for you. He said you weren't home."

"Doggone Ash, anyhow," replied the rancher, with impatient good-humor. "Whenever a cowpuncher rides in hyar, Ash tells him we've got smallpox or such like. He's not sociable. But you mustn't judge us other Prestons by him. Hyar, Tom," he called, turning toward a lanky youth in the background, "take these hosses. Throw saddle an' pack on the porch of the empty cabin. Wal, stranger, you're down, so come in."

Rock had not noticed that the next cabin, some distance away under the pines, was a double one of the picturesque kind, long, with wide eaves, a porch all around, and ample space between the two log structures. Evidently the second cabin was a kitchen. But both had large stone chimneys. Deer and elk antlers, saddles and skins, hung on the walls between the cabins. Table and benches there indicated where the Prestons dined.

"Reckon it'll be pleasanter sittin' outside," said Preston, and invited Rock to a rustic seat. "What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't say—yet," laughed Rock. He liked Preston, and could not help but

compare the son most disparagingly with the father.

"Thiry didn't tell me either," went on the rancher. "But I know you're the young fellar who was polite to her an' did somethin' or other for her thet made Ash huffy."

"Yes, I am. It wasn't much, certainly nothin' to offend Miss Thiry's brother."

"Aw, Ash was drunk. An' he shore ain't no credit to us then. Young man, I'll say you didn't lose any time trailin' Thiry up," went on Preston quizzically, with a twinkle in his big gray eyes.

"Mr. Preston, you—I—I—" began Rock, somewhat disconcerted.

"You needn't lie about it. Lord knows this hyar has happened a hundred times. An' don't call me mister. Make it plain Preston, an' Gage when you feel acquainted enough. You're not tryin' to tell me you didn't foller Thiry out hyar."

"No—not exactly. I came to ask you for a job."

"Good. What'll you work fer?"

"Reckon the same as you pay any other rider. I'm an old hand with ropes, horses, cattle—anything about the range."

"Wal, you're hired. I'm shore in need of a man who can handle the boys. I run two outfits. Ash bosses the older riders. If you fit in with the youngsters it'll shore be a load off my mind."

"That suits me fine. I reckon I can hold up the job."

"Wal, you strike me all right. But I gotta tell you thet no young man I ever hired struck Ash right. An' none of them ever lasted."

"Preston, if I turn out to be of value to you, will *you* want me to last?" queried Rock, and this was the straight language of one Westerner to another.

"Wal, I like your talk an' I like your

looks. An' if you can handle my boys an' stick it out in the face of Ash, I'll be some in your debt."

"I don't know Ash, of course. But I can take a hunch, if you'll give it."

"Wal, Ash sees red whenever any puncher looks at Thiry. He cares fer nothin' on earth but thet girl. An' she's awful fond of him. She's never had a beau. An' Thiry's near twenty-two."

"Good heavens! Is her brother so jealous he won't let any man look at her?"

"Wal, he wouldn't if he could prevent it—thet's daid shore. An' far as the ranch hyar is concerned he does prevent. But when Thiry goes to town accidents happen, like you meetin' up with her. Thet riles Ash."

"In that case, Preston, I'm afraid Ash will get riled out here. For I reckon the same kind of accident may happen."

"Hum! Hum! You're a cool hand to draw to. What'd you say your name was?"

"I haven't told you yet. It's Trueman Rock, late of Texas. But I used to ride here."

The rancher apparently met with instant check to his mood. "What? Trueman Rock!—Are you thet there True Rock who figgered in gun-play hyar years ago?"

"Sorry I can't deny it, Preston."

"Say, man, I've heerd about you all these years. Damn funny I didn't savvy who you were."

"It's been six years since I left here—and perhaps you heard some things not quite fair to me."

"Never heerd a word thet I'd hold against you. Come now, an' meet these hyar eleven other Prestons."

Rock faced the ordeal with mingled emotions, chiefly concerning Thiry, but

with nothing of the inhibition he had labored under while encountering Ash. Thiry, however, to his keen disappointment, was not one of the half dozen Prestons who answered the rancher's cheery call.

Mrs. Preston appeared a worthy mate for this virile cattleman. She was buxom and comely, fair like all of them, and some years younger than Preston.

"Ma, this is Trueman Rock, who's come to ride fer me," announced Preston. Then he presented Rock to Alice, a girl of sixteen, not by any means lacking the good looks that appeared to run in the family. She was shy, but friendly. Rock took instantly to the ragged, barefooted, big-eyed children, Lucy and Burr.

"Where's Thiry?" asked the rancher.

"She's ironin', Dad," replied Alice.

"Wal, didn't she hyar me call?"

"Reckon she did, Pa, for you'd 'most woke the daid," replied his wife, and going to the door of the second cabin she called, "Thiry, we've company, an' Pa wants you."

Whereupon Thiry appeared in the door in a long blue apron that scarcely hid her graceful symmetry. Her sleeves were rolled up to the elbow of shapely arms. She came out reluctantly, with troubled eyes and a little frown. She showed no surprise. She had seen him through the window.

"Good afternoon, Miss Preston," greeted Trueman, evincing but little of the pleasure that consumed him.

"Oh, it's Mr. Rock, our new grocery clerk," she responded, with manner and tone that was a little beyond Trueman. "How do you do! And aren't you lost way out here?"

"Hey, Rock, what's thet aboot you bein' a grocery clerk? I reckoned I was hirin' a cowboy."

Whereupon Rock had to explain that he had been keeping store for Sol Winter when Thiry happened in. Thiry did not share in the laughter. Rock thought he saw the gray eyes quicken and darken as she glanced swiftly from him to her father.

"Thiry, he's goin' to handle the boys," replied Preston, as if in answer to a mute query.

"You are a— a cowboy, then," she said to Rock, struggling to hide confusion or concern. "You don't know the job you've undertaken. What did my brother Ash say? I saw you talking with him."

"Your brother was not—well, quite taken with my visit. He told me you didn't see every rider who came along. And that your father was not home."

"Never mind, Rock. It's nothin' to be hurt about," added Preston. "Ash is a queer, unsociable fellar. But you're shore welcome to the rest of us. Thiry, if you never heerd of True Rock, I want to tell you he's been one of the greatest riders of this range. An' I need him bad, in more ways than one."

"Oh, Dad, I—I didn't mean—I—of course I'm glad if you are," she returned hurriedly. "Please excuse me now. I've so much work."

Somehow Trueman divined that she was not glad; or if she were, it was owing to her father's need, and then it was not whole-hearted. But the youngsters saved him. They sidled over to him and began to ply him with questions about the white horse, which had captivated their eyes.

"What you call him?" asked Burr.

"Well, the fact is I haven't named him yet," replied Rock, surprised at the omission. "Can you think of a good one? What do you say, Lucy?"

"I like what Thiry calls him," she said, shyly.

"Your sister has a name for him? Well, that's nice. Tell me. Maybe I'll like it," said Trueman, with a feeling of duplicity.

"Egypt," announced Lucy impressively. "Isn't that just grand?"

"Egypt?—Oh, I see. Because he's like one of the white stallions of the Arabians. I think it's pretty good. We'll call him Egypt."

"That'll tickle Thiry. I'll tell her," cried the child joyously, running into the kitchen.

Rock contrived, while letting Burr drag him round to look at the antlers and deer and elk, to catch a glimpse of Thiry at her work. She was alone in there, for Lucy had come running out. Rock thought she looked very sweet and domestic and capable. On the way back round the porch he stopped a moment to have another glimpse. This time she glanced up and caught him. Rock essayed to smile and pass on, to make his action seem casual.

But her gaze held him stock-still, and it was certain he could not find a ready smile. She ceased her ironing and transfixed him with great eyes of wonder and reproach, almost resentment. She accused him, she blamed him for coming. He had brought her more trouble. Rock was so roused that he forgot himself and returned her look with all the amazement and entreaty he felt. Then the paleness of her face seemed suddenly blotted out; hastily she bent again to her work.

"Come, Rock, let me show you the ranch," called Preston. "We're shore some proud of it."

"You ought to be. I've seen a sight of ranches, but this one is the finest," returned Rock, as he left the porch.

"Pa, soon as Thiry's done we'll have supper, so don't go far," spoke up Mrs. Preston.

"All right, Ma. I reckon Rock couldn't be driv very far," replied the rancher, drawing Rock away.

The grassy divide sloped gradually to the west, and down below the level, where cedars grew thicker and the pines thinned out, were the corrals and barns and open sheds, substantial and well built. Rock found his white horse in one of the corrals, surrounded by three lanky youths from 16 to 20 years old. Preston introduced them as the inseparable three, Tom, Albert, and Harry. They had the Preston fairness, and Tom and Harry were twins.

The barns were stuffed full of hay and fodder, some of it freshly cut. A huge bin showed a reserve of last year's corn. Wagons and harnesses were new; a row of saddles hung opposite a dozen stalls, where the Prestons no doubt kept their best horses. But these were empty now. A long fenced lane ran down to pastures. Horses were whistling down there, cows mooing, calves bawling.

"Preston, if I owned this ranch I'd never leave it a single day," was Rock's eloquent encomium.

"Wal, I'd shore hate to leave it myself," returned the other tersely.

"How many cattle have you?" queried Rock, because he knew this was a natural question.

"Don't have much idee. Ten thousand haid, Ash says. We run three herds, the small one down on the Flats, another hyar in the Pass, an' the third an' big herd up in the Foothills."

"Naturally the third means the big job," said Rock.

"Shore will be for you boys. Thar's a lot of cattle over thar thet ain't mine.

Ash said eighty thousand haid all told in the Foothills. But thet's his exaggerated figurin'."

"Gee! So many? Who's in on that range beside you?"

"Wal, thar's several heavy owners, like Dabb, Lincoln, Hesbitt, an' then a slew of others, from homesteaders like Slagle an' Pringle to two-bit cowpuncher rustlers. It's sort of a bad mess over thar. An' some of the outfits haven't no use fer mine."

"Ha! That's old cowboy breed. You can't ever change it. I know Lincoln. But Hesbitt is a new one on me."

"Yes, he came in soon after me," replied Preston shortly. His speech, to Rock's calculating perceptions, had lost heartiness and spontaneity. But Rock doubted that he would have observed this subtle little difference had he not come to Sunset Pass peculiarly stimulated by curiosity.

"Sol Winter told me you'd worked a new wrinkle on the range," went on Rock matter-of-factly. "Wholesale butcherin'."

"Yes. Always did go in fer thet. Hyar in this country I first set in killin' an' sellin' to local butchers. Then I got to shippin' beef to other towns not far along the railroad. An' all told I've made it pay a little better than sellin' on the hoof."

"Reckon it's a heap harder work."

"We Prestons ain't afraid of work," said the rancher. "But it takes some managin' as well. I made a slaughterhouse out of Slagle's place, an' then we do some butcherin' out on the range."

"What stumps me, Preston, is how you get beef to town in any quantity," responded Rock.

"Easy for Missourians on these hard roads. We got big wagons an' four-hoss

teams. In hot summer we drive at night."

"So you're from Missouri," went on Rock, with geniality. "I sort of figured you were. I once worked with an outfit of Missourians. They have a lingo of their own, somethin' like Texans. Better educated, though."

"My girl Thiry went to school till she was seventeen," Preston spoke with pride. "But the rest of them had little schoolin' 'cept what Thiry has taught them out hyar. Wal, you'll want to unpack an' wash up fer supper."

It was just sunset when Rock came out of the cabin assigned him. Sitting down on the stone steps of the porch, he found there was an open place between the trees permitting unbroken view of the Pass.

A bell called Rock to supper. When he reached the cabin, to find the Preston boys straddling the benches, it was to be accosted by the rancher.

"Rock, you set hyar on my right. Thet'll put you across from Thiry. Are we all hyar? Whar's Ash?"

"He rode off somewheres," replied one of the boys.

"Wal, Rock, meet Range Preston, an' thet's his real name—an' Scoot, which is short for some handle Ma gave him once—an' Boots, whose proper name is Frank. Boys, this is Trueman Rock."

Preston's humorous introduction, and Rock's friendly response, elicited only a "Howdy" from each of these older sons.

"Reckon we can eat now," added Preston. "Set down, Rock, an' pitch in."

The long table was bountifully spread, steaming, savory. Mrs. Preston sat at the foot, with Lucy on one side and Burr on the other. Alice's place was next to Rock, and she most solicitously served him.

There was hardly any unnecessary conversation. The male contingent, Rock observed, devoted themselves to the supper, like any other hungry cowboys. Presently Rock stole a glance at Thiry, to catch her eyes on him.

When supper ended, dusk had just fallen. It was not going to be very dark, at least early in the evening, for a half-moon soared out from under the white fleecy clouds.

Rock sat on the edge of the porch, attended again by the children. The older sons stalked away while the younger lingered, evidently accepting the newcomer. The womenfolk, except Thiry, who had gone into the other cabin with her father, were in the kitchen.

Presently the rancher came out alone. "Boys, hyar's some work fer you to break Rock in on tomorrow," he said. "Grease the wheels of the green wagon. Then hitch up an' go down to the slaughterhouse. Fold tight an' pack all the hides thet are dry. Haul them up to the barn. An' Tom, next mornin' soon as it's light you hitch up again an' drive down an' meet us at the Flats. Then you come back home."

"All right, Pa," drawled Tom.

"Rock, thet doesn't sound much like work to you. But your job is to keep these three harum scarums from ridin' off into the woods. You'll have your hands full, fer they're shore Indians."

"Boss, if I can't hold them in I'll do the work myself," replied Rock.

Before the hour passed, Mrs. Preston and Alice came out, and Thiry, too, and they all sat around on the porch and grass enjoying the cool breeze coming up the Pass. The moon shone brighter as the clouds grew more open. There were moments of pale gloom, then a long interval of silver light.

The shadow of the pines on the white grass fascinated Rock. And presently he found that being there, except for the silent Thiry so disturbing to him, was no different from being in the company of most any hospitable Western family. The discordant note—Ash Preston—was absent. Rock made himself as agreeable as he knew how, to the youngsters especially, and then to the mother, who responded readily.

Preston retired within his cabin, and soon after the boys slouched away. Trueman rose to say good night.

Thiry had been standing some moments, in the shadow of the cabin, apparently listening. "Mr. Rock, would you like to walk with me to my cabin?" she asked.

"Why—pleased, I'm sure," replied Rock haltingly, scarce able to conceal his joy. What old-fashioned courtesy! Good nights were exchanged, and Rock found himself walking away under the great dark pines, in the shadowed moonlight, with Thiry beside him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rock's Dilemma

THIRY walked beside him, slender, light-stepping, with her profile showing clear-cut and cold in the moonlight. As she did not speak, Trueman dismissed the idea that her invitation was simply an old-fashioned courtesy. Therefore he made no attempt at conversation. When they had covered most of the distance to her cabin, without exchanging a single word, he felt anew and provokingly the growing excitement of this situation.

At last she slowed her step, hesitated, and halted under the magnificent pine tree that made dark shade around her

cabin. Outside the circle there were spaces of silver moonlight, and then streaks and bars of black shadow across the light. The night wind breathed in the huge spreading mass of foliage overhead.

The girl confronted Trueman, and her face had the sheen of the moonlight, her eyes the darkness and mystery of the shade. "Mr. Rock, I want to talk to you," she said very quietly.

"Yes?" rejoined Trueman encouragingly, but he was not in the least encouraged.

"Mr. Rock, do you remember the last moment, when you were with me at the corral in Wagontongue?" she asked.

"I'm not likely to forget it," he returned.

"You looked something at me. You didn't say so, but you meant you'd see me again. Now didn't you? Honest?"

"Miss Preston, I—I certainly did," answered Rock hastily. "But, indeed, I didn't mean to be rude or—*or bold.*"

"I don't think you were either," she said earnestly. "I—We might sit down," she suggested, indicating a rustic bench under the pine. "I am tired."

The bench appeared to catch a gleam of shadowed moonlight. Thiry could here be seen more clearly than while she stood in the shade. Rock preferred to stand, and he wished he could not see her so well.

"Mr. Rock, please don't misunderstand," she began, looking up. "I was far from being insulted or even offended that day in the store and at the corral. At the last, there, you meant you'd see me again. And you've done it. Now we're concerned with that."

"Reckon I might have waited a decent little while," responded Rock, as she

paused. "But I never met a girl like you. I wanted to see you again—soon. Where's the harm?"

"Indeed there isn't any harm *in* it, Mr. Rock, but harm can come *from* it."

"How?"

"Through my brother Ash."

"Well, that's not hard to believe," rejoined Rock, with sharpness. "The other day he was a drunken, vulgar lout. He ought to have been kicked out of that corral, and I'd have done it but for you. Today, when he was sober, he was a different proposition to meet. He was cold, mean, vicious. He had no hospitality of the West—no idea what was due a tired and hungry stranger. But at that I'd prefer him drunk. In my day on the range I've met some—"

Trueman bit his tongue. The girl had suddenly covered her face with her hands.

"Aw, Miss Preston, forgive me," he burst out. "I didn't mean to distress you. I just spoke out quick, without thinkin'—"

She drew her hands away and lifted her head. "You're quite right—Mr. Rock," she said unsteadily. "Ash is—all that you say. To my shame I confess it. All my life I've made excuses for him. It's no use, I—I cannot do it—any more. But that's not the point."

Rock sat down beside her, his anger flown, but there was another kind of heat running along his veins. How this girl must love her brother!

"I know. The point was the harm that might come through Ash. Please be frank with me. If I've brought this distress upon you, I'm entitled to know why."

"I've always been very—very fond of Ash," she said tremulously, struggling for a composure that would not return.

"Partly because he was always so bad—and I seemed the only one who could influence him for good. Ash cares for nothing but me. Not for father, mother, brothers, or his other sisters. He hates men—he hates horses—he hates cattle. I—I've stuck to him until now I—I—Mr. Rock, I can't tell you."

"Spare yourself, Miss Preston," returned Rock impulsively. "It's wonderful—beautiful of you. I admire and respect you for it. But I can't understand."

"No one can," she said, sadly. "Alice thinks I'm mad. Oh, how I dread this! But it has to be done—more with you than with any other who ever tried to be friends with me. I've known lots of boys, and liked them, too. But not lately. As I grow older Ash grows more jealous. He fears I might like some cowboy."

"Oh, I see! Is such a remarkable thing possible?" returned Rock, unable to resist a slight sarcasm.

"Of course it is," she retorted. Her eyes flashed at him. "Mr. Winter used to tell me about you. Then Dad—I never saw him taken with anyone as he is with you. But the thing is I *can't* be friends with you."

"Because of Ash?"

"Yes. He will not let any boy or man be friends with me—at least out here at Sunset. Cowboys have called on me here and many have come to ride for Dad. Ash soon got rid of them."

"I wonder how he did all that. I know cowboys well, where a pretty girl is concerned. And I'm just curious."

"I'll tell you. Ash has chased them away in every conceivable manner. He's lied, as he lied to you about my not seeing riders who came to Sunset.

He'd coolly invite them to leave. He'd bluff. He'd threaten. He'd cripple and shoot their horses. He'd get them drunk while on guard—which Dad couldn't forgive. He'd ridicule any sensitive cowboy before the outfit—so terribly that the poor fellow would leave. He'd concoct devilish schemes to make a cowboy seem negligent or crooked. And as a last resource he'd pick fights. Oh, he has beaten several cowboys brutally. Then worst of all—he has thrown his gun on more than one. Archie Black will be a cripple for life. And Jack Worthington nearly died of a gun-shot."

"How very interestin'!" exclaimed Rock, and for the life of him he could not keep his voice normal. "And has nothin' ever happened to this bully?"

"Oh, Ash didn't always come out scot-free. But nothing to bother him. I don't believe Ash has nerves or heart or feeling."

"Yet you love him!" ejaculated Rock bitterly.

"I do—more because I seem the only one. But it's not so much that. I've kept him from going to the bad."

"How could he be any worse?" asked Trueman incredulously.

"Oh, he could be. You don't know—you can't understand. But I do."

"Miss Thiry, have you been so vastly concerned for the good health of all these poor lovesick cowboys as you seem about mine?" asked Rock.

"You are sarcastic again. Oh, you're not—so nice as I thought you'd be. Yes, I was concerned—worried about these boys. But I've never been so—so scared as I am over your coming."

"Scared! For me?"

"Yes, for you—a little. Oh, I can't lie to you. I'm scared because of the—the harm that may come—if you stay."

Rock leaned closer to study the lovely face, the deep eyes that flamed at him yet tried to hide true feelings. "You said you couldn't lie?" queried Rock.

"I never told—a—a—black lie in my life," she faltered, with her head lifting.

"Then—are you honest with me? What is the reason you want me to run off like a coward?"

"I've been trying to tell you," she replied, hastily ignoring his first query, which he saw had made her start. "But I don't want you to be a coward. I'd think it brave, generous, to help me. I told you and I tell you again harm, terrible harm, might come of this, if you stay. Ash will not try any of his tricks on you. For you are different. Why, my dad said to me, not an hour ago, 'There, lass, is a cowboy whose face Ash won't run in the dirt. An' he won't be throwin' guns around so careless. True Rock is a different kind of a hombre from all those Ash has stacked up against.' I was thunderstruck. It seemed almost as if Dad was *glad*. I never saw him speak like that. And lightning flashed from his eyes."

"Oh, this spurred me to speak with you. Can't you see? You are different. You're a man—and one with a—a—please forgive—a bloody record. I don't despise you because of that. Since I've lived West I've learned there are bad gunmen and good gunmen. My brother Ash is one kind—you are the other."

She was in the grip of strong emotion now, beautiful and soul-moving to Rock. "You wouldn't stay here—with us—and—and leave me alone?" she asked, with a simplicity wholly free of vanity.

"Yes, I might—if you cut me cold or

slammed the door in my face," he answered.

"That I couldn't do. If you stay on, living here and eating at our table, I could not help but talk to you, be with you some. I think it would be nice—if Ash wasn't around. I—I'm afraid I might like you. There isn't any reason why I shouldn't. Now, if you stayed—you'd—you'd—"

She broke off as if unable to find adequate expression. But her voice, her look, were more than sufficient to make Rock fight temptation. How easy to lie to this innocent girl! He could do that and stay on here, and deceive Ash Preston, too.

"Yes, Miss Thiry, I would," he returned swiftly, to get by the danger. "I would be a very great deal worse than any cowboy you ever knew."

"So—you see," she said, entreatingly. "Then you and Ash would fight over me. First with fists, probably, like a couple of beasts. Then with guns! Oh, that's the horror of it—there would be blood spilled. He might kill you, which would be terrible. But most likely you would kill *him*."

"I'll just make up my mind I won't fight. I'll keep out of his way. I'll do anythin' for you."

"But you've only seen me once!" she exclaimed despairingly.

"I'm not committin' myself yet, because I'd hate to embarrass you more without bein' sure. But I'm afraid, if seein' you the other day wasn't enough, this time is."

"Oh, please go away tomorrow—before it's too late," she implored.

"You want me to go as bad as that?" asked Rock, weakening.

"I beg you to. I've begun to be afraid of you, and I wasn't at first. You're so sharp—so keen. You'll—" Suddenly in

her agitation, she jerked a hand to her lips, as if to silence them. Her eyes dilated. She stared up at Rock like a child who had almost betrayed herself.

Rock, if he did not read her mind, had intuition enough to grasp that part of Thiry's fear, perhaps the greater, was not due to the inevitable clash between him and Ash. She was afraid he would find out something. Rock hastened to thrust the insidious thought from him. "Afraid of me!" he ejaculated hurriedly. "Why, Thiry—Miss Thiry, that's absurd! Right this minute I'm the best friend you have in the world."

"Then prove it," she said, bending closer.

"How?"

"Go away tomorrow."

"And never see you again?"

"It would be best," she returned, and looked away. "But I didn't say you'd never see me again. Perhaps I—we might meet in town. I'm going in over the Fourth. Mrs. Dabb is to give a dance. I could see you there."

At that Rock laughed rather wildly.

"At Amy Wund's house? Not much!"

"Then at the dance. It won't be at her house. I—I'll go with you—if you ask me."

"Don't bribe me to run off from Sunset Pass," he said. "But thank you for sayin' you'd go with me. I'd like to. But I'm not invited and don't expect to be."

"I'll see you get an invitation, Mr. Rock."

"Don't tempt me. I'd almost give my head to take you to a dance. I'd almost quit my job here and then come back to it again."

"But that would be a lie."

"Well, I might lie, too. I don't mean to you, but for you."

"Please, Mr. Rock, go away tomorrow

before trouble comes. I'll never be able to thank you enough. It's the only chance you have to be my—my friend."

"You're a queer, wonderful girl," he replied, puzzled and sad.

"I will come to town oftener—then," she almost whispered.

"You'd meet me in town and hope to deceive Ash?"

"Yes. I—I'll try," she faltered.

"But he'd find it out. You can't fool that hombre. Then he would have a real case against me. He'd hunt me down, force me to meet him."

"Oh!"

"If I give in to you and leave Sunset Pass, I'd never willingly see you again," he went on, with more bitterness.

"Mr. Rock, that wouldn't be such a— a loss to you as you imagine now," she answered.

"I don't know. All I know is that I hate to refuse you anythin'. Listen. There's two sides to this deal, and here's mine." He leaned close so that he could see her better in the pale shadow. "I want you to know about me. I was born in Illinois. My mother and father are livin'. They're quite old now. I was home five years ago. I have a sister. She ought to be nineteen now—a fine, pretty girl. Well, I went to school till we moved out West. Then I went to ridin'. My father lost out in the cattle business and took the family back home. I stayed. That was—fourteen—sixteen years ago.

"Durin' these sixteen years I've lived the life of a wanderin', ridin', drinkin', fightin' cowboy. I stuck here on this range longest of all. I don't say I was bad, but I wasn't much good. I was always gettin' in trouble for other people. That's how I came to shoot Pickins. It was a good riddance. But the sheriff then—Cass Seward—was a friend of

Pickins'. I didn't want to kill Seward, so I left Wagontongue. I stayed away six years, then had to come back. I got there the day I met you. Found out a lot of other things. I wanted to know about my old girls."

"I had always been crazy over pretty girls. Sol Winter told me a lot of bad news about the girls—and about his son Nick. So I lost my happy mood. I wanted to go out and get drunk. Sol asked me to keep store for him. And I sat there sinkin' into one of the old black spells that had kept me from makin' someone out of myself. Then you walked in that store. And I didn't want to go out and get drunk. Somethin' happened. I don't know yet what it was. But it was wonderful. Somethin' happened to me. It's been such a tearin', changin' somethin' that I don't know myself. I'm findin' out little by little. Seein' you this second time has helped a lot. I'll make a clean breast of all—soon as I know."

"Mr.—Rock!" she exclaimed, rising, low-voiced and trembling. "Are you telling me you—you love me?"

"No, I'm not tellin' you that," he returned doggedly. "But I'm sure afraid somethin's terrible wrong. Miss Thiry, please—please don't make me go away."

"Could I make you do anything? How silly! But if you're manly enough to save me misery, you will go."

"That's hittin' hard. Suppose I get it into my mind that by *stayin'* I can save you *more* misery?"

"Mr. Rock!" she cried, shocked.

His sudden query had been a random shot, but it struck home. Rock's heart leaped. He had to stifle a wild impulse. "*Quien sabe?* I might," he returned, almost coldly. "Give me a day to think over whether I'll go or stay. Reckon

so far the fight's one-sided and in your favor. I'll meet you tomorrow night and tell you."

"Tomorrow night. Here at this hour?" she returned, rising from the scat.

"Yes. Good night, Miss Preston."

"I'm very, very sorry—Good night."

Rock gave her one long look as she stood now in the moonlight. Then he strode away, and when he turned, at quite some distance, she was still standing like a white statue.

He made his bed on the porch, so that he could lie there and watch the moon, and think over this maddening situation.

For hours it seemed he never got anywhere, so far as decision was concerned. His mind was chaotic. The moon soared white and grand above the pines and the night wind roared. A low soft murmur of running water came to him in the lulls of the wind.

At last he admitted that he loved Thiry Preston. Time was nothing. He had always known her, and though the hours were but few since their actual meeting, he was now measuring their incomprehensible length and fullness.

If he could best serve Thiry Preston by passing out of her life as quickly as he had come into it he would do so. But he had a strange persistent recurrence of a doubt. He recalled her words, her looks, her actions, and relentlessly analyzed them. His love, once acknowledged, incited and stimulated his mind.

Before the moon tipped the pines above the rim of the Pass, which was late in the early morning hours, Rock had solved at least the second of his three problems.

Thiry Preston was honestly afraid her brother Ash would kill him or that he would kill Ash. So she wanted to

send Rock away. But only so far was she wholly honest.

She feared Rock would discover something wrong there at Sunset Pass. Ash Preston was crooked. Perhaps the father was, too, and some of the brothers. But Mrs. Preston was ignorant of it; so were Alice, and the younger brothers. Thiry bore this burden alone. That was the secret of her sad eyes and lips. That was the power Ash Preston had over her—love for him and fear. That was why no cowboys ever got a fair chance to win Thiry Preston's friendship.

To go or stay—that was the question! If he left her, she might love him, surely would always remember him regretfully, tenderly. If he stayed she would hate him. But then he might save her.

Rock knew the West. He had become a part of it. The Prestons were new, comparatively, to this wild range. He knew Western men, their slow evolution, their uncanny power to suspect and search out and find among them the cattleman who transgressed the unwritten laws. All cattle-raisers stole from one another. But there was a distinction with a difference.

Gage Preston was getting rich—a little bit swiftly for a rancher on an ordinary scale. How? Rock answered the query in many ways, but only one way seemed tenable. Preston sold cattle on the hoof, the same as other ranchers. None but rustlers ever sold cattle that did not belong to them. And certainly Preston could not be a rustler. It was inconceivable that Ash Preston could be a rustler, either, at least without his father knowing. But Rock scouted the rustler idea.

The Prestons had become butchers of cattle on a considerable scale. Did anyone, outside themselves, know just

how many steers they butchered? Rock was certain that he would find out that no outsiders knew how many head of stock they killed. And here was the gist of the matter.

Some of the Prestons, with Ash at the head, and the father either in with them or unable to prevent it, were killing cattle not their own, burning or hiding the skins, and selling the beef at near and distant points.

CHAPTER SIX

Quicklime

A BELL awakened Rock from late slumbers. The sun was up, and as he peeped out over his blanket covering he saw the grass shine gold under the cedars. He had overslept, which was not a remarkable fact, considering how long it had taken him to get to sleep.

While performing his ablutions his thoughts whirled, and then steadied to the stern consideration of the task before him. In the sober light of day it seemed tremendous. He had to prove his suspicions, which had lost no strength during sleep, and if they were well founded, then he must somehow stop the illicit proceedings before the Prestons were overwhelmed by catastrophe.

Briskly he strode toward the double cabin, conscious of heart-beating anticipation, and when he thumped upon the porch Alice Preston came out of the kitchen, carrying plates and cup, which she set upon the table. She smiled at him. How pretty she was!

"I'm ashamed, Miss Alice," he said as he stepped over the bench. "Think of a cowboy late on his first mornin' of a new job! But I promise it'll not happen again."

Rock made short work of his breakfast,

and glad somehow that he had not encountered Thiry, he hurried away down toward the corrals. At the barnyard Rock found Al Preston leading in some horses; and one of his brothers was jacking up a hind wheel of the green wagon.

"Mornin', boss," drawled Al.

The other boy nodded at Rock.

"Are you Tom or Harry?" asked Rock, suddenly reminded of the twins.

"I'm Harry."

"All right, Harry. I'll know you tomorrow or bust. Where's Tom?"

"He left us to grease the wagon and went off after a horse for you."

"For my white horse, Egypt?" asked Rock.

"No—I'm—sorry to say. Ash saddled him and rode off on him."

Rock for the moment succumbed to a silent fury. But seeing the gray-eyed brothers watching him curiously, keen to catch how he would take this first move of Ash's, he thought he had better explode naturally and wholesomely, as might any cowboy. "Dammit!" he yelled lustily. "He took my new white horse! And my saddle that I wouldn't lend to the King of England! Doggone! Boys, was it supposed to be a joke?"

"Joke nothin'. Ash was just mean, like he always is when we get a new rider. But if you take my advice you'll swallow it—leastways till Ash comes back. If you follow Ash now, mad as you are, there'll only be another fight."

"Take it as a joke. Or better be nice about it," added Harry. "That always stumps Ash. If he can't make you mad he lets up—for a while, anyway."

"Thanks, boys, I'll think it over," rejoined Rock, grateful for their solidarity.

"Let's get to work," suggested Harry. "We're late. And Ash ain't the only one Pa can cuss."

While Rock and Al greased the wagon wheels, Harry hitched up, and by the time this task was done Tom rode in, leading a horse. It was a bay that instantly took Rock's eye, and which would have made up for the loss of 'most any horse, except one like Egypt.

"Where's Ash's saddle?" he asked.

"It's hangin' there," replied Al. "But, gee! you won't ride his, will you?"

"I'll be darned if I won't," returned Rock with grim humor. "You boys rustle along. I'll catch up." When Rock rode around the barn he espied the wagon far ahead down the gentle slope. He moved on at a trot, his mind busy. He came to the forks of the road, and taking the left one he entered the cedars, climbed the ridge, and descended to a grassy open meadow, only to mount another cedared ridge. It was not long until the sweet sage-wind suffered a change and became tainted. Rock rode up a sparsely cedared slope to a level bench, and soon came upon the site that had once been Slagle's ranch. The boys were halting before the several cabins. As Rock rode up, the stench unmistakably heralded a slaughterhouse. Cabins, corral fences, barns and sheds, and even the trees bore ghastly evidence of the nature of what this old Slagle ranch had sunk to. Skins of cattle hung everywhere.

The horses were turned loose to graze, and Rock, with the three boys, set to work. It was no easy task for one man, or even two men, to fold a stiff hide and compress it into small space. But that was what they had to do. As the day grew warmer the odor increased. Rock did not drive the boys, but he drove himself. He heard Al say to his brothers in an aside, "Sure he's a hawg for work."

Nevertheless, during this labor, and while joking with the brothers, without any ostensible interest in the place or the hides, Rock was bending all his keen faculties toward the end that he had determined upon. Nothing escaped his sharp eye, yet during the half day that it took to complete this job he did not observe anything that struck him significantly. Toward late afternoon, however, he happened to kick a piece of white substance, not stone, and of a color markedly contrasting with the red earth. He smelled it—tasted it. Quicklime! Rock put it in his pocket.

In due time Tom mounted the loaded wagon to drive home, while the other brothers rode off toward the woods, each now with a rifle over his pommel, and Rock was left alone.

He took out the piece of quicklime. It did not appear to be very old. He looked around where he had found it to see if there was more. After diligent search he found a smaller piece. Quicklime in any quantity there, might be used to deaden the stench of decaying offal, blood, and bones. Rock searched all the cabins, sheds, bins, without finding any more. None had ever been used upon the horrible pile that had accumulated in the hollow below the slaughterhouse.

Manifestly the Prestons left the entrails and skeletons of their cattle there on the ground to rot. No need to waste valuable time destroying what the elements, the dogs, coyotes, and hogs would soon do away with. But they might have left something here that they wanted to destroy quickly. Hides! Cow hides they could not sell because these did not bear their brands!

All of a sudden, into Rock's searching mind there flashed memory of a deep well he had once helped to dig on these

premises. Slagle wanted to get water close at hand, to obviate the necessity of packing it uphill from the brook. But they never struck water, and at 80 feet abandoned the effort.

Since that time brush had grown heavily all around the ranch houses, but after some search Rock located the well. The edges had weathered, widening the mouth. He could not get right to the brink at this point. On the opposite side, however, opened a break in the brush. He was about to crash his way through the bushes, around to this opening, when his caution urged him not to leave a trail. Carefully he retraced his steps, worked around into a narrow path, in which he saw boot tracks.

Reaching the well, Rock peered down. He saw only the gravel sides and the black hole. He dropped a stone into it. A low soft thud, barely distinguishable, came to his taut ears.

"By gum!" he ejaculated. "That well had a rock bottom." Rock cautiously stretched himself on the ground, and putting his head over the brink of the well he sniffed like a tracking hound. He caught a faint scent of something that was not earth or brush and certainly not rotting hides. And it was rotting cattle hides which he expected to smell.

Resting a moment, he tried again. This time he caught the scent strongly enough to recognize it. Quicklime! Rock sat up, suddenly sweating, though he felt a cold chill. He felt no doubt that down this well, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of cattle hides had been dropped—not one of which bore the Preston brand.

Rock crawled on hands and knees back along the edge of the path, making certain not to leave the slightest mark.

He found another piece of quicklime, and several smaller pieces. No doubt they had spilled out of a sack. When he got to the boot tracks he scrutinized them with the photographing eyes of a trailer of long experience. He cut twigs from the under side of a bush, and with minute care measured the length and breadth of the most clearly defined print. These twigs he stored in his pocket.

He retraced his steps back to the open, and saddling the horse the boys had brought up before they left, he mounted, and rode quickly away to get out of the stench.

The daily phenomenon that gave this Pass its name was in full and glorious sweep when Rock reached his cabin.

There were fewer clouds, and these hung round the distant peaks, as if anchored to the steep higher slopes. Strange to see no gold in this sunset! But pearl gray and silver sheen and shell pink filled the great gap of sky. The curtains and shafts of colored light were wanting, too. Yet withal there was exquisite beauty, rarer, more delicate, quickly evanescent and soon gone.

Rock shaved and changed his clothes. He made sure, this evening, to be on hand before the first supper bell rang.

Alice, who had rung the bell and called gayly, "Come and get it," took her seat beside Rock. "We're livelier when Ash and Pa are away," she said, smiling.

"So I notice. Sure hope they stay away long," he replied.

Thiry, as before, sat opposite Rock, and when he could summon courage to look straight at her he suffered another twinge at the enhanced sadness of her face.

Nevertheless, Rock had such hold on himself that he amused and interested

Mrs. Preston, brought smiles to Alice's face and shouts of glee from the children. But as soon as he had finished supper he excused himself and seeking the gloom of the pines, he gave himself up to turbulent anticipations.

The moon appeared long in rising, and Rock, patrolling a beat under the trees, both longingly and fearfully watched for the silver radiance over the rim. It came at last and found him unprepared.

At length he could no longer procrastinate. Skirting the edge of the pines, he circled the slope, and soon found the great pine under which he had talked with Thiry the night before. The far side of the Pass was blanched in moonlight; this side was dark in shadow. Rock was unable to see the rustic seat until he could almost touch the tree.

To his mingled relief and disappointment Thiry was not there. He sat down to watch and think. A light shone through the curtained window of her cabin.

He heard the cabin door open. A broad light flared out into the gloom. Then Thiry appeared in the doorway, clearly defined. She wore white. She closed the door behind her—vanished. But Rock heard quick light footfalls. She was coming.

Presently her pale form grew more distinct. Rock saw her put out her hands, feeling for the tree or the bench. He reached up to take them.

"You're—late. I—I've been here twice," she said.

"I'm sorry, but it took courage to come at all," returned Rock.

"Didn't it, though? Mr. Rock, you—you are holding my hands. Please let go so I may sit down."

He released her and leaned back

against the pine, conscious that her presence had ended his uncertainty. She sat down, quite close to him, and bent her head forward a little, as if trying to pierce the gloom.

Suddenly the moon slipped up over the black rim, and magically the darkness lightened. A silver radiance touched the girl's hair and face.

"Ash stole your horse?" she began tentatively.

"Reckon I wouldn't say stole. But he sure borrowed Egypt."

"*Egypt!* I knew you named him that."

"Yes. Much obliged to you."

"Who told you?"

"Lucy. I've sure a stand-in with her."

"So it appears. I should be pleased that you called Leslie's horse by the name I gave him. 'Most everybody knows. Ash certainly knows. And—that's why I can't be pleased or flattered."

"Lucy was, anyhow. She said you loved the horse."

"Oh, I do. I used to ride him, too. How glorious it was! But Ash caught me once—and then, well, I never got on him again."

"Your world revolves around your brother Ash," mused Rock. "Well, some day I'll put you on Egypt, right here in your yard. And some other day—maybe—I'll give him to you."

"Oh! You couldn't—and I couldn't accept." She was silent a moment, evidently not quite sure how to take him.

"Dad says the man doesn't live who can stand Ash's meanness."

"Well, I'm livin' and maybe I can. I suppose you want to know what I'm goin' to do about this horse deal?"

"Worry over that has made me sick all day. I don't want to hear, but I must."

"When Ash gets back, I'll go up to

him nice and pleasant. I'll say, 'Look here, cowboy, if you want to borrow my horse, ask me for him'."

"Suppose he comes back without Egypt?"

"Then I think I'd better pass it off as if nothin' had happened. I'd ask your father. And if Egypt was crippled I'd go find him and end his misery."

Then followed a long silence.

"Mr. Rock, you—you were to tell me something tonight?" she began nervously.

"Thiry," said Rock, with deep feeling, "last night I almost gave in to you. It was terribly hard not to. But tonight I have hold of myself. You can't persuade me. You can't drive me. I shall stay. I've thought all night and all day. Out of this torture has come two facts, which I believe as I do my own soul."

"What are they?" she asked.

"I believe I can serve you best by stayin' at Sunset Pass."

"And the other?"

"I love you."

She flung out her hands, protestingly, imploringly, and as if to ward off some incomprehensible peril. "Mr.—Rock!" she gasped. "You dare make love to me—when we've never been together an hour—when I'm insisting you leave my home!"

"I'd dare that, yes, under any circumstances," he retorted, coolly. "But as it happens, I'm not makin' love to you. I'm tellin' you a simple fact. I'm not likely to annoy you with it soon again. I shall leave you blissfully alone. I shall hardly be even polite if I see you at mealtime. Your brother Ash will soon see that there's one rider who's not mushy over you."

"To what end?" she went on sharply. "Is that to deceive Ash, so you can stay here?"

"Partly. But I'm bound to confess that it's to spare you."

"Oh, you're not going to spare me," she cried. "You'll not leave me alone. And even if you did Ash would believe it only a blind—that you were with me during his absence. It's a poor plan. Please give it up."

"No."

She began to twist her hands in her white gown. The agitation, which before he had marked, was possessing her again. The idea that he had decided to stay at Sunset Pass held some singular dread for her.

With evident strong effort she controlled some almost irresistible fear or conflict. Her glance changed to one of deep and unfathomable mystery. Rock divined she had been driven to extremity, and he grew sickeningly sure that she was involved somehow with Ash and her father in something which would not bear the light of day.

"Trueman Rock, I want you to leave Sunset Pass," she said, leaning to him.

"So you've told me about a thousand times."

"Let's risk being discovered meeting at Wagontongue," she went on. "You can get work anywhere. We'll take Mr. Winter into our confidence. We can meet in his store and spend an hour or two in his office. Then I'll arrange to stay with Mrs. Winter all night when I come to town. You can meet me there, too. I will go to Wagontongue every week."

"Why would you be willin' to do this unusual thing?" asked Rock, eager to lead her on and on!

"Didn't you say you—you wanted to be friends with me?"

"I sure did."

"It's your only chance. And I'm giving

you that to get you—to persuade you to leave here."

"Thiry, I ask you again—*why* do you want me to leave?"

"To keep you and Ash apart."

"Is that the only reason?"

"It's the—the big one," she replied, with both voice and glance unsteady.

"But that won't keep Ash and me apart. He will come to town when you do. He'll watch you."

"I'll choose the time when he is away with Dad. He won't know that I go to town."

"When he's away—where?"

"Why, on the range. Dad has large orders. The driving and—and the—the work will take up half his time from now on."

He ruthlessly laid traps for her, but the sole reason was not only to lead her into betrayal. "You would risk so much for me?"

"It's not for you, though I know I—I—*will* like you, if you let me. It's for Ash and Dad—all of us."

"It's very sweet of you, Thiry," he said, with just enough satire to belie the portent of his words, "but very little to risk my life for."

"No, Trueman, it may save your life."

"You call me Trueman?"

"Yes, Trueman. We can deceive Ash. The Winters will do anything for me. Ash will never catch us together."

"How long would you expect this sort of thing to go on? We couldn't keep it up forever, could we? And when it came to an end—and I worshiped you—what then?"

"I'd run the same risk as you."

"Thiry Preston, are you offerin' such a hope to me?" he asked huskily.

"It's not a hope, but a chance—only a chance—and all I *can* offer."

"But a chance—that means a lot," he

went on, without remorse. "I could be with you alone?"

"Yes, as long as you wished."

"Could I make love to you?"

"How could I keep you—from it?"

Rock seized her hands, and bending his head, he kissed one and then the other. "Thiry," he whispered, "I led you on. I wanted to see how far you would go. I could make you love me—but so help me God, I wouldn't have your love at such sacrifice. I'll win it square and fair—or never. Now, I'll go, and I'll not speak to you soon again. Trust me, Thiry. Good night."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Preston Gives Advice

FOUR days passed, days full of hard labor for Rock, and pondering thought, and slow absorbing adaptation to the most difficult and strangest situation he had ever encountered. Early at breakfast and late at supper he saw Thiry and then only to exchange a greeting. He did not look to see if she looked at him, though curiosity and longing consumed him.

On the fifth morning Al remarked, locanically, "We sure gotta hustle today, for Pa will be home."

"Why the particular hustle today, Al?" queried Rock.

"Pa has a way of slippin' up on us, an' it'd sure never do to be ketched loafin'. He wouldn't let us go to the rodeo and dance on the Fourth."

"I'd forgotten about that," rejoined Rock with enthusiasm. "Are all the folks goin'?"

"Pa and Ma ain't goin', but sure the rest of us Prestons are."

"Includin' Ash?" asked Rock casually.

"He never missed one yet that Thiry

went to—leastways a dance. Reckon you'll ride in with us?"

"I'll ask your dad," returned Rock, thoughtfully. It would be very much better, perhaps, for him to remain on the ranch. Yet the urge laid hold of him. He could take just a peep in at the dance to see Thiry in a party dress.

"Reckon, on second thought, I will go," he said to Al.

Late in the afternoon the brothers left off work and rode home. This time Rock went with them. They reached the barns, to ascertain that Ash and the others had not yet come in. Rock, after caring for his horse, slowly sauntered up the slope to his cabin.

While he was cleaning up for supper, he heard the clip-clop of trotting horses, then a rattle of wheels. With a start he went to the door. Scoot Preston was driving up on the seat of a big empty wagon. Two more wagons had topped the slope. The burly form of the older Preston hove in sight, riding a roan and leading two saddle-horses. A little afterward, sight of Ash on Egypt shot a quick stab through Rock. The next instant he relaxed. The white horse appeared tired, but none the worse for the absence.

Whereupon he strolled out leisurely. As he came in sight of the arriving Prestons, halfway between the cabins, Gage spied him, and with a start he wheeled about from the family, who were welcoming him, to dismount like any cowboy, and hurried to intercept Rock. As he drew near, his deep gray eyes betrayed considerable anxiety. "Wal, Rock, how are you?" was his greeting, accompanied by extended hand. "The boys say you-all got on fine. I'm sure glad."

"Howdy, boss!" returned Rock cordially. "We got the fence job 'most done."

"Ha! You don't say? Wal, I'll be doggoned. How'd you ever get thet out of them?"

Preston fell in step with Rock, and they approached the double cabin, where on the wide porch were collected the women and children. Ash was the only one of the returning brothers who got down on the ground.

"Cowboy, I shore hope you won't rile Ash—leastways hyar before the women," said Preston hurriedly.

"Don't worry, boss," returned Rock, with a genial laugh. He had caught a glimpse of Thiry, who kept somewhat in the background.

Egypt was standing, bridle down, halfway between Ash and the porch. One glance told Rock that he was gaunt, dirty, and rough, but apparently as sound as ever.

"Howdy, boys!" said Rock, nodding to the drivers on the wagons. Then, halting beside Egypt, he turned to face Ash Preston. Despite his iron control a slight quiver strung his frame. How cool, intent, potential of evil menace this man! He stood at ease, hands on his hips, his black sombrero slouched back, his blue-flame eyes piercing Rock, as if to read his mind. Rock had met penetrating glances before, and this one shot little cold sparks along his marrow.

"Howdy, Ash! Did you like my horse?" Not improbably that was the last query Ash Preston would ever have anticipated.

"Best hoss I ever forked," he replied, without feeling of any kind.

"Thanks. Hope you were good to him."

"Wal, Rock, the fact is I begun bad," drawled Ash. "But he piled me in the brush. An' runnin' him over rough

ground didn't faze him none. An' I reckon I ended treatin' him good."

"Dog-gone! Leslie swore this horse never pitched in his life."

"Reckon thet was no lie, Rock. But I nagged him. He threw me, an' I couldn't get near him again thet day."

"Served you right," responded Rock naturally. "It doesn't pay to be mean to horses. And see here, Ash, don't go borrowin' a horse from a rider without askin' him."

The tension relaxed, the charged atmosphere lost its fullness and suspense. Ash, though he betrayed little of what might have been his true state, eyed Rock with slow, cool smile, and slouched with clinking steps to the porch.

Thiry met him, reached for him in glad excitement: "Oh, Ash, I'm glad you're back—and you—and everything's all right."

Ash wrapped his long arms around her, and hugging her closely, he bent his head over her. The action seemed eloquent, beautiful, and yet it pierced Rock like fire. Bending down to feel the legs of his horse, he kept that posture until he had recovered. Without a glance backwards, then, he led Egypt down toward the barns.

Rock spent so much time caring for Egypt, cleaning and brushing him, and making him a comfortable bed of grass in a stall, that it was dark when he got back to his cabin. The supper bell rang. He hurried out as the Prestons were seating themselves at table.

For the first time in five days Rock looked deliberately into Thiry's face. She gave him a grateful smile, wistful and wondering, as if she would make amends for doubt. It softened Rock, and though he did not glance at her again, he managed to get through the meal cheerfully.

Afterward, to his relief, Preston called him into his cabin. "Have a drink with me, Rock," invited Preston.

"Sorry, boss, but I've quit."

"Have a cigar, then. I shore recommend these."

"Thanks," replied Rock. "Did you have a successful trip?"

"Best ever, but that won't interest you," returned Preston briefly. "I'll say, though, that when the trip ended hyar I was some worried. It was hard to figger you. Ash shore wasn't able to. An' you clean knocked the pins from under him. He didn't, an' neither did any of us, expect you to take that dirty deal so nice an' friendly."

"What else could I do?" demanded Rock, spreading wide his hands. "I came out here to make friends, not enemies."

"Wal, I'm shore thankin' you. You've got Ash stumped. I heard him ask Lucy if you'd been runnin' after Thiry."

"Humph! What did Lucy say?"

"Lucy said you hadn't—that you were seldom hyar, an' then never paid no attention to Thiry. Is that so, Rock?"

"Reckon it is, since you left."

"You an' Thiry quarreled, I take it," went on Preston. "She didn't say so, but she has a way of makin' the boys leave her alone. I didn't think you'd be so easy, an' I'll gamble it won't last. Just before supper Thiry told me you'd acted wonderful with Ash—that she'd misjudged you. Don't remember when I've seen the lass so strange. The truth is, Rock, I think she likes you. You've shore begun right, if you're in earnest about her."

"Preston, the minute I laid eyes on Thiry I fell in love with her. It's changed my whole life. I used to be free, careless hombre, runnin' after girls, ridin' here and there, drinkin', gamblin', fightin'. But that's past."

"Thanks fer talkin' out," rejoined Preston, bending deep, inscrutable eyes upon Rock. "Course you mean marriage, cowboy?"

Rock stared a moment. "I'd be the happiest and luckiest fellow on earth."

"Wal, that's talkin'," returned Preston gruffly. "Do you want my advice?"

"Preston, I—I'd be most grateful for anythin'."

"Thiry ought to be told."

"Aw, no! So soon? Before I've proved what—I'd only distress her—do my cause harm."

"Cowboy, you don't know women," said Preston. "The very fact that you came to me an' declared yourself, straight like your name, will go far with Thiry, an' all of us 'ceptin' Ash. An' even Ash couldn't help but see that was right. He beat a cowboy once who dallied after Thiry without talkin' marriage."

"Like as not he'd try to beat me—if I did tell her."

"Wal, I'm appreciatin' your fine feelin's, Rock, so I'll tell her myself," replied the rancher, and turning to the open door he called, "Thiry!"

Immediately the dark doorway framed a slender form in white, with wistful, expectant face and great, doubtful eyes.

"Come in, lass, an' shut the door," said her father.

She complied, and came forward hesitatingly, her glance going from her father to Rock.

"Thiry, come hyar," he went on, and when she drew close he put an arm around her. "Lass, Rock has asked your hand in marriage—an' I've given it."

Slowly she released herself from her father's arm, with widening, darkening eyes, that seemed fascinated by Rock.

"Reckon it's sudden, lass," spoke up Preston. "But that's this cowboy's way. An' True Rock comes straight to *me*. I like thet. Your ma will, too, when I tell her."

"What do you think—*Ash* will say?" she broke out.

"Ash? Wal, child, he's not your dad or your boss. You're no kid any more. You're a woman, free to do as you want. You shore don't have to ask anythin' of Ash."

"Father!" cried Thiry incredulously, almost with horror.

In that exclamation of protest, of unbelief, of consternation, Rock delved further into this Preston mystery. It seemed to betray Preston's guilt along with that of his son, and Thiry's knowledge of it.

"Wal, lass, will you answer Rock now or do you want some time to think it over?" asked Preston, coolly, unabashed or unconcerned by her agitation. He was deep. He was playing a game that Rock sensed but could not fathom. His effect upon Thiry was also beyond Rock's ken.

"Mr. Rock, I thank you," said Thiry, through trembling pale lips, "for the honor you do me. I'm sorry I cannot accept."

Rock bowed, with what little dignity he could assume.

"Thiry, wait a minute," said her father, as she made for the door. He caught her and held her, unmistakable affection in his grasp. "I'm sorry to upset you. But these things will happen. Don't think your dad wants to get rid of you. I'm powerful fond of you, Thiry. It's only thet lately—wal, I don't want to worry you about what might happen to me. I might not always be hyar to take care of you. I'd like to have your future settled before—before long. An'

Rock struck me about right. Aw, there you're cryin'. Wal, run along. I shore can't stand a cryin' woman, not even you. An' it's no great compliment to Rock."

Thiry held her head high as she walked by Rock without giving him another word or glance, and he saw that she was weeping.

"Preston, I ought to knock the day-lights out of you," declared Rock wrathfully, when Thiry was gone. "If I ever had any hope to win Thiry, it's sure gone now."

"Much you know about women," said Preston. "She knows now you want to marry her. Thet always fetches a woman, provided she ain't in love with someone else. Have another cigar, cowboy. I see you've mashed thet one."

Rock discovered that not only had he crushed the cigar, but he had burned his fingers. "Preston, I can't be mad at you, but I sure want to be," returned Rock, resigning himself.

"Set down," said the rancher. "You'll shore be goin' in to town with the rest of the outfit. They're leavin' day after tomorrow. Thet reminds me. I run into thet pretty Mrs. Dabb, an' she said to tell you to be shore an' come to her dance. She's havin' the new town hall decorated."

"Well, in that case I might go," replied Trueman thoughtfully.

"Say, cowboy, wasn't this Dabb woman an old flame of yours?"

"Well, she wasn't exactly mine, but that wasn't my fault."

"Ho! Ho! I know the lady. Thet is to say I've seen her with the cowpunchers. Reckon John Dabb was a damned old fool, marryin' thet young lady. Wal, Rock, if she happened to be a little sweet on you yet it'd shore be lucky fer you. It won't hurt your cause none

to let my lass see other women like you."

"Boss, you must have been a devil among the women, in your day," said Rock slyly. "How would you handle this particular case of mine, regardin' the dance?"

"Wal, as you're a handsome cuss, you want to make the most of your chance. It's to be a masquerade, you know."

"Masquerade? I didn't know."

"You get yourself up in some dandy outfit. Then first off be cold to Thiry an' sweeter'n pie to your old girl. But you want to be slick, cowboy. Don't carry it too far. Don't overdo it."

"I'm afraid I couldn't do it," replied Rock with a grimace, as he flung his second cigar into the fireplace. "It'd be funny; it'd be great, if I dared. But I think I'll rustle now, before you get me locoed. Good night."

Rock went to bed, where he listened to the sing-song of pines overhead. One by one Rock's thoughts brought him back to the conviction that Preston was deeply involved in crooked work and Thiry knew it.

He awakened at dawn with an idea which must have generated in his subconscious mind while asleep. It was that he should start toward Wagontongue ahead of the Prestons instead of waiting until they had gone. He wanted to stop long enough with Slagle to dig through the husk of that rancher's reticence. Likewise, he wanted to ride over that part of the range which had been the scene of Preston's latest labors. With Preston at home and his family on the road, there would be opportunity for Rock to confirm or disprove his suspicions.

At breakfast Rock asked permission to leave that day, instead of on the morrow, and it was readily given. Saddling

Egypt, and leading the rested and mettlesome horse up to the cabin, Rock tied a couple of blankets behind the cante, and rode away under the pines, without being noticed, so far as he could tell, by any of the family.

What he devoutly hoped was that Preston had not worked close to the Pass. The Flats, Rock had ascertained, were the wide gray cedar-dotted levels some miles this side of Slagle's ranch. Tom Preston had been given orders to drive the green wagon as far as the Flats. Trotting briskly along, his eyes keen on the broad wheel tracks, Rock soon arrived at the bottom of the slope, where the ground spread wide and flat for miles.

He found where the wagon had left the road to halt in the first clump of cedars, and then had gone on again, back to the road. A mile or more this side of Slagle's ranch, which was hidden in the rough hilly country west of the Flats, the wagon tracks and hoof tracks of saddle-horses turned off the road. Rock did not care to follow them until the Prestons had passed, and even then he would be careful how he did follow. Ash Preston might have eyes as good as his own.

To Rock's disappointment, he found that Slagle was not at home, and he could do nothing else but ride on.

A couple of miles down the road Rock met the wagon tracks again, coming from across the Flats.

"By golly! looks like a short-cut, doesn't it? I guess not!" exclaimed Rock derisively. Then he discovered that these tracks were fresh, and made on the return home. The wagons had been empty. This was longer and harder going than 'round the road. Rock passed on a few hundred yards, to find where the Prestons had driven into the road

on their outward trip. And still farther on he came to more tracks, older by some weeks.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fresh Hides

AFTER pondering awhile, Rock decided he might safely risk some careful scouting around, provided he left no traces and kept keen survey of the several miles of road. With this in mind he tied Egypt on hard ground, and taking to the thickest part of the cedars he mounted the hill, then went on to the summit of the ridge.

Eagerly Rock came up behind a cedar, and from this cover he peered out and down. The slope on that side sheered steep and rough, down to an open draw, up which his keen sight roved. This draw appeared pale green, with a dry wash in the center. It led up to a wide pocket, where yellow water gleamed. Cows were bawling. White objects flashed in the sunlight. Then he discerned a cabin and corral, covered with white spots, also men on horses and on foot.

Rock slipped to his knees, and crawling to a low thick cedar bush he half buried himself in it, and peered out. The white objects were cowhides, thrown over the corral fence, and nailed on the cabin, hair side down. There were seven riders, several still sitting their saddles, the others walking around.

One of the cowboys, a tall fellow wearing a red scarf, turned some of the cowhides over to look at the under side. Presently he and the others collected in a group and talked. Watching like a hawk, Rock convinced himself that these riders were curious about Preston's butchering business, though nothing

inimical to the Prestons manifested itself.

Rock strained his eyes to take in all details of that red-scarfed rider's appearance, so he might recognize him some day. But the distance was pretty far, and he could not be sure. Presently the mounted riders galloped off, and those on foot took to their horses and followed. They rode up the ridge, westward from the cabin. The fellow with the red scarf, following last, halted on the brink of that pocket and took final survey of the scene. Then he followed after his comrades, who had disappeared over the ridge.

Rock counted the cowhides in sight. Thirteen! But there might be several more hides on the far side of the log cabin. Even so, that was rather a small number, if the hides in sight represented all the beeves killed by Preston on this occasion. Preston had gone to town with three large wagons, one of which Rock had helped load with hides. The other two, of course, had been loaded with beeves. How many? That was something Rock wanted to know—and meant to find out.

No doubt at all was there that the cowhides in plain sight over in the draw bore one of several of Preston's brands. If other stock besides Preston's had been butchered, which Rock did not doubt in the least, the hides with their tell-tale brands had of course been well hidden.

Straddling Egypt once more, Rock rode down the hill toward Wagontongue. Cedars and brush grew densely at the foot of this slope, where the road crossed a culvert over a deep wash. Rock's eyes, bent on the ground, suddenly spied the heel imprint of a rider's boot. He had seen that heel track before. Slipping out of the saddle, Rock bent to scrutinize

it. And he experienced a queer little cold chill.

The impression of the heel was well defined, but the toe part was dim. It pointed off the road. Rock found another, like it, though not so plain. But for his trained eyes the trail might as well have been made in snow. It led into the coarse white grass, down over the bank, to the edge of the culvert, where it vanished.

There was no doubt in Rock's mind that this imprint was identical with the one near Slagle's well. He had the little sticks with which he had measured that track. Taking them out, Rock was about to go back and measure, when his instinct prompted him to take a look at the culvert, now that he was down there. He walked on, stepping on stones.

When Rock stepped into the mouth of the culvert he saw a lumpy floor, which at first glance he thought consisted of rocks lying on dried mud. A foot track, the one he was trailing, brought a low exclamation from his lips. Bending quickly with his little sticks he tried them. They fitted perfectly. Moreover, this one had been made recently.

When Rock rose from that track he knew what he was going to find. The tunnel appeared about a hundred feet long, with light shining in at both ends, and the middle dark. The numerous stones on the floor were of uniform size and shape, and he noted that the first of these lay back several yards from the opening of the culvert.

Rock kicked one. It was soft. Bending to feel of it and to look at it more closely, he ascertained that it was a burlap sack tied 'round something. He laughed sardonically.

"Cowhide," he said, and went on,

kicking to right and left. These stone-like objects were all hides tied up in burlap sacks. They were old. Some of them were rotting. Then toward the middle of the culvert, where the bags were thickest, he found that those in sight were lying on a bed of bags, flat, decomposed. Altogether, hundreds perhaps thousands of hides had been destroyed there.

Rock went back to the point where he had found the boot track. If fresh cowhides had lately been deposited in this hiding-place where were they? Rock searched the ground more carefully. Back from the opening it was difficult to see well. Nevertheless, he trailed the heel track a third of the length of the culvert, toward its center.

Naturally then he reached up to feel where he could not see. He had to put his toes in crevices between the stones to climb up and reach over the top of the wall. The thick logs placed across from wall to wall, and far apart, left considerable room along the top.

When Rock's groping hand came in contact with a sack he felt no surprise. This one was not soft. It appeared to hold heat. Grasping it firmly, Rock dropped to the ground and hurried with it to the light. He ripped it open. Quicklime, hot and moist! A fresh cowhide, wrapped with hair inside!

With hands that actually shook, Rock unfolded the hide. No slight thing was this proof of somebody's guilt—about to be disclosed! The brand was clear—a half moon. Rock had never heard of it. He certainly knew all the old brands of that range.

He rolled up the hide, stuffed it in the sack, with the little quicklime he had spilled, and put it back where he had found it. Then he struck a match.

By the dim light he saw rows of burlap sacks, neatly stowed away.

Rock sneaked out of that culvert and into the cedars and 'round and up to his horse as if indeed he were the guilty one himself. Not until he was riding away down the road, positive that he had been unseen, did he recover his equanimity.

That boot track had been made by Ash Preston. Rock knew it. Gage Preston was growing rich by butchering other ranchers' cattle. The very least implication Rock accorded to Thiry Preston was that she shared the secret, and therefore indirectly the guilt.

Rock scarcely saw the beautiful rangeland. He rode past Pringle's place before noon, scarcely aware of it. He was in no mood for friends. But in due time his emotion spent itself upon the resolve to save Thiry if he had to die to do it.

After that he gradually rounded to a coherent, if not a logically connected, sequence of thoughts. When cattle disappeared off the range, any range, in more than a negligible number, it always led, sooner or later, to speculation and private suspicion by every outfit, and usually investigation, also private, by the outfit that had suffered most. Rock recalled cases where quite extensive rustling had never been cleared up. Ranchers worked slowly in this regard. They might step on someone's toes. Generally when the perpetrators of crooked work were unearthed, it was accomplished by the cowboys rather than the ranchers.

Rock had no idea how far this extraordinary dealing of the Prestons had gone. It would take considerable time to find that out, if it were possible at all. But it had proceeded far enough to be extremely hazardous for them,

and in fact for any riders connected with them.

Rock believed that before another year was out, if the Prestons kept up this amazing and foolhardy stealing, they would be found out. Why could not Preston see this? He certainly did not lack intelligence. It might well be true that Ash Preston, having led or forced his father into criminal practice, dominated him wholly. Ash Preston struck Rock as a man without fear or conscience, and even without a heart, except where Thiry was concerned.

It was long past dark when Rock arrived at Wagontongue. The long ride and the long hours of emotional and mental conflict had exhausted him. Not for years had he been so sunk in gloom. The urge to drink came upon him, and he laughed it away. It was well that he fell asleep at once.

The sawmill whistle disrupted his deep slumber at six o'clock, but he enjoyed the luxury of the soft bed and linen sheets awhile before rising. Rested and fresh again, and with the bright gold sunrise shining in his window, Rock felt far removed from the brooding, fagged rider of the night before. He would find a way. He dared to pit himself against Ash Preston in anything.

After breakfast he went 'round to see Sol Winter. Winter was sweeping out the store, his back to the door, and he saw Rock approaching.

"Sol, I want to find out somethin'," said Rock.

"What?" asked Winter, as Rock led him back into the store.

"Preston drove in here a couple of days ago," went on Rock, lowering his voice. "In the outfit were three wagons I know of. One was full of hides, which I helped pack. The other two were loaded

with meat. Beeves! Now I want to find out how many beeves there were and where they went. But I don't want this information unless we can get it absolutely without rousin' the slightest curiosity or question. Savvy old pardner?"

"Wal, I'll be darned if that ain't funny, for I shore can tell you right now what you're so keen about knowin'.

"Heard it quite by accident," went on Winter. "Jackson, who runs Dabb's butcher shop, once worked for me. Wal, I went in last night to buy some beef-steak to take home. An' I seen a lot of fresh meat hangin' up. Shore I always was curious, but I never let on I was. All I said was: 'See you're stocked up plenty an' fresh. How're you ever goin' to sell all that meat before it spoils?'"

"'It won't last over the Fourth,' he said. 'Long as I got plenty an' can sell cheap to the Mexicans an' lumbermen, it shore goes fast. Wagontongue will soon stand another butcher shop, Sol, an' any time you want to talk business with me I'm ready.'

"I'll think it over, Jackson," I said. "But where'll we get the meat? Reckon we couldn't cut in on Dabb's supply?"

"'No, we can't,' he told me, 'but Preston is killin' now altogether instead of sellin' any more on the hoof. He's gettin' thirty dollars more by killin', on each head of stock. He'll sell to anybody. Today he shipped thirty-six beeves. Driscoll told me. Shipped them to Marigold.'"

Winter paused to see what effect this news might have upon Rock.

"Thirty-six!" muttered Rock, with unreadable face and voice.

"Yep. An' I counted ten beeves hangin' up on Jackson's hooks. All fresh. So that makes forty-six. What you want to know all this for?"

"Gee, Sol, you're a gabby old lady!" returned Rock. "I was just askin', because you and I might go into the meat business. And say, who runs the Half Moon brand?"

"New cattleman named Hesbitt," replied Winter. "He's been on the range over two years. They say he hails from Wyomin', has got lots of money, an' runs a hard outfit. Clink Peeples is foreman. You ought to know him, Rock."

"Clink Peeples. By gum! that sounds familiar. I've heard his name, anyway. What does he look like, Sol?"

"Onusual tall punchier. Sandy-complected. Somethin' of a dandy, leastways in town. Always wears a red scarf. An' he's one of the gun-packin' fraternity. Clink will be in town shore over the Fourth."

"Red scarf? Ahum!" said Rock. "Well, Sol, I'll run along, and drop in again."

Reaching Dabb's new store, Rock went in and hunted up the suit department. It chanced that there was in stock a black broadcloth suit, with frock coat, which might have been made for him, so well did it fit. Rock purchased it and an embroidered vest of fancy design, a white shirt with ruffles in the bosom, a wide white collar and a black flowing bow tie to go with it. Lastly he bought shiny leather shoes, rather light and soft, which augured well for dancing. Not forgetting a mask, he asked for a plain black one.

After supper the hotel man, Clark, got hold of him and in a genial way whose intent was obvious to Rock, tried to pump him about the Prestons. Rock had met that same attitude before during the day, and without apparent evasion he did not commit himself.

Rock strolled to and fro between the hotel lights and those on the corner.

As he came into the yellow flare of light, a hand, small, eager, and strong, seized his arm, and a feminine voice he knew rang under his ear. "True Rock, I've been on your trail all afternoon."

CHAPTER NINE

John Dabb's Wife

ROCK stared down into the piquant flushed face of his old sweetheart, Amy Wund.

"Why—how do—Mrs. Dabb? You sure—"

"Oh, Mrs. Dabb, hell," she interrupted, flashing dark passionate eyes up at him. "Call me Amy, can't you? What's the sense of being so formal? You used to call me 'darling Amy'."

There was no gainsaying that. "Well, good evenin', Amy," he drawled. "I've forgotten what I used to call you. Reckon it's not just good taste for you to remind me."

"Perhaps not, True. But you make me furious. Let's get out of the light. I've got to talk to you." Pressing his arm tight she hurried him down the dark street.

"Amy, listen to sense. Oughtn't you be home?" asked Rock gravely.

"Sense from True Rock? Ye gods! When I was sixteen you *made* me meet you out, at night, because my father wouldn't let you come to our house," she retorted.

"That's so, Amy. I guess I was no good. But I've learned a little in all these years—at least enough to consider a woman's name."

"Thank you. I believe you have. And it's not true you were no good. Now about my being at home. I suppose I

ought to be there, since I took the responsibility of it. But it's an empty home, Trueman. I am alone most of the time. John has men come there to drink and play cards and talk business. He objects to my friends. He is as jealous as the devil. Just a selfish rich old man!"

"Aw, too bad, Amy," replied Rock, deeply touched. "You never should have married Dabb."

"Father was in debt to John and I had to foot that bill, True," she returned bitterly. "But I didn't waylay you to talk about myself. Did you get the invitation to my dance?"

"I did. Many thanks, Amy. It was good of you. I rather expected to be left out."

"Are you coming, True?"

"Well, now, that's a horse of another color," he said. "I'd sure like to. I might drop in for a little—to look on."

"True Rock! You look on at a dance! Why, cowboy, are you growing old?"

"No, Amy, I feel far from being old. But there are reasons. You should know one of them, anyhow."

"You mean my husband?"

"Sure do. He never had any use for me after I quit him."

"All the same, Trueman, I'd like you to come for several reasons."

"All right, fire away," he said, lightly.

"First for old times' sake. Then because certain of my friends say you won't come. Next because—well, True, I've been a darned fool. I've gone—a—a little too far with a certain cowboy. And I'm afraid of him. He's coming to my dance. And I thought—if you were there—I'd not be afraid, anyhow."

"Who is he, Amy?"

"I don't know his real first name. His last is Peeples. Clink, they call him."

"Clink Peeples. I've sure heard of

him. He rides for this new rancher, Hesbitt."

"Yes."

"Very well, I reckon your third reason is enough to fetch me. I'll come."

"Oh, thank you, Trueman," she replied in delight, squeezing his hand. "You always were the dearest, kindest fellow when anyone was in trouble."

"Amy, I don't exactly trust you," said Rock, dubiously. "I never did. But that doesn't mean I haven't faith in you at all. Could I help you—as a friend or brother?"

"Yes, you could, and I'll be grateful for that—if I can't have more," she rejoined, won to sincerity by his force.

"All right. Shake hands on it," he said.

"But, True, I won't promise not to try to—to make you be more."

"Don't talk nonsense," he returned sharply. "Amy, will you consent to my callin' on your husband?"

"You want to see John?" she queried, astounded, her eyes opening wide. "What on earth for? All right, go ahead. You have my consent. Tell him anything you want, except I was once in love with you—and that it's not utterly impossible for me to be so foolish again."

"I'll take good care you don't do that," he laughed.

"Trueman, I have something more to say," she said, hesitatingly, lacking her former confidence and spirit. "I think you'd better quit riding for the Prestons."

"Why?" he inquired, freezing a little.

"I believe the Prestons are going to get more than the ill will of the range."

"That's a strong statement, Amy. On what do you base it?"

"True, I can't trace it down. But it must come from many little bits of gossip I've heard. Some of it, by the

way, from Peeples. Everyone knows, of course, that you took the job to be near Thiry Preston. That's your side of it. Trueman, you have a reputation. Oh, I don't mean as a gun-slinger. That's old. Nor do I mean as a great rider, roper, and all such cowboy qualities. It's that you're true blue, honest, a man of your word. I could tell you a lot of things, if I could remember. One is—Clink Peeples said he reckoned Gage Preston would profit by your honest name. Isn't that a queer remark, Trueman?"

"It is—a little," Rock admitted.

"And here's another—more of a stumper," went on Amy. "Last night John had some men out to the house, as usual. When I heard your name I listened. Someone, I think it was Mr. Hesbitt, answered whoever had used your name first. 'I don't know this great cowboy Rock,' he said. 'But if he stays on ridin' for Preston, I'll not share the opinion you men have of him.' Trueman, there's something wrong about this Preston outfit. There's an undercurrent of feeling against them. It'll spread, if there's any reason for it. And then you'd be dragged in. True, will you leave Preston? You can get three times the money."

"No. I'll stick, Amy. I should think you'd know that. If there's anythin' in these hints I reckon the Prestons need me all the more."

"I always loved you for that very trait," she said with passion. "But I wish here you didn't have it. Oh, Trueman, I tell you I dread this job of yours. That wild, beautiful Sunset Pass! That lovely, strange, Thiry Preston! She'll fall in love with you. How could she help it? And you'll be dragged in with them. You'll have to kill this

Ash Preston. There's not room enough on this range for you and him. You'll fight. I feel it, Trueman. A woman knows."

She wiped her eyes. "Forgive me," she said, more composed. "I didn't mean to speak out like that. Let us walk back now. You can drop me at my corner."

She did not speak again for several blocks. She held his arm closely. Rock did not have anything to say. The interview had surprised, annoyed, frightened, and softened him.

"True," she said softly. "What will you wear at my masquerade?"

"Look here, that's not fair. I won't tell you."

"You must. I'll never be able to recognize you. I remember how clever you used to be. The unmasking will not take place until dinner. That'll be late, Trueman. And I'll want to know you, so in case I need you. You may have to throw Clink Peeples out."

"So the honor of protectin' you falls to me," laughed Rock. "I've half a mind you're lyin'. But I'll stifle my suspicions. Amy, I'll come as a flash gambler."

"You'll look grand. Bet you make more than *one* heart ache," she returned, with a glance of mischief and regret. Then she extended her hand. "Good night, Trueman."

"Good night."

Next morning about eleven o'clock, Rock strolled out of the hotel on his way to see John Dabb. He was shown into that individual's private office, and walked into a richly furnished room, where two men sat smoking. One was John Dabbs, not a great deal changed from the Westerner Rock had once worked for.

"Howdy, Mr. Dabb!" said Rock easily. "Reckon you know me."

"Trueman Rock!" exclaimed Dabb in great surprise. Embarrassment succeeded his astonishment, which was perhaps what caused him to extend his hand. "Hesbitt; this is True Rock, one of the real riders we used to have," went on Dabb, recovering to introduce his comrade, who had also arisen.

Hesbitt bowed stiffly and spoke, without offering his hand.

Rock looked squarely at him. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Hesbitt."

His keen faculties, on edge now, gauged this man, unfavourably. Hesbitt was younger than Dabb, probably a man who had never been a cowboy, for he did not show the physical characteristics of the range. He was lean, fallow, hard, with sharp eyes close together and deep under bushy eyebrows.

"Well, Rock, to what am I indebted for this call?" queried Dabb.

"Remains to be seen whether you'll be indebted to me or not. Reckon that's up to you," replied Rock, and then he took a slow step nearer to Dabb's companion. "Mr. Hesbitt, I heard this mornin' that your foreman, Peeples, was in town, wantin' to see me."

"Yes, he got in early, and I believe does want to look you up."

"Reckon he can't be particular eager," drawled Rock. "I've been up and down street, and in and out of the hotel all mornin'—lookin' for Mr. Peeples."

"Ah! I see. I dare say he's very busy buyin' supplies," replied Hesbitt, nervously. "May I inquire—er—what you want of my foreman?"

"Nothin' so important—that is, to me," said Rock, with emphasis on the pronoun. "I just wanted to give Peeples opportunity to meet me. And to tell him somethin'."

"What?" asked Hesbitt, whose sallow face slightly paled.

"Reckon I'd like you to know as well. Not till two days ago did I ever hear of the Half Moon brand. And not till yesterday did I learn what outfit run it."

Manifestly Rock's cold, biting speech impressed Hesbitt, but scarcely to the acceptance of its content. He knocked the ashes off his cigar, and picked up his hat from the desk, without deigning another glance at Rock. "Dabb, your former cowboy's talk is queer, if true," he said curtly. "I'll leave you to renew old acquaintances. Good day."

"Hesbitt, you're new to this range," rejoined Dabb, a little caustic. "I've told you before. And your Wyoming cowboy foreman needs to be told—or he'll get into trouble. I'm bound to tell you that Rock's talk is not queer. I'll gamble it's true. I never knew him to lie. And no old rider or cattleman on this range would say it, even if he thought it."

Hesbitt bowed and went out, jarring the door.

Dabb bit viciously at his cigar. "Some of these new cowmen make me sick. Rock, help yourself to a smoke and sit down."

"Dabb, I sure appreciate what you said to him about me," replied Rock, losing his coolness. "Fact is I'm surprised, too. I'd been told you had no use for me."

"Rock, that's not the point," returned Dabb quickly. "When I knew you were honest, I was bound to say so. Your connection with Preston has started rumors. Hesbitt has been losing more stock than any of us. His outfit is a hard-nut bunch from Wyoming. They think you're—well, I don't want to repeat gossip. But whether or not I have any use for you I'd sure need to see proof of your dishonesty."

"That's straight talk. I like it and thank you. It makes what I wanted to say easier. Dabb, did I ever do you any dirt?"

"You quit me, left me in the lurch," replied Dabb testily. "I never overlook that in a foreman."

"But be fair, at least," responded Rock earnestly. "I had to leave quick—or kill another man, and one very generally liked here, Cass Seward."

"You may have thought so. Cass was a friend of mine. He told me once you didn't need to run off. He could have fixed it up. Arrested you—and let you off. It was an even break, you knew. Anyway, I know everybody was glad you bumped him off."

"Ahuh! I'm sorry I didn't know that," said Rock broodingly. Then he shook off dark thoughts. "Dabb, did you have anythin' else against me?"

The rancher thrummed on his desk, and puffed on his cigar, while revolving this query.

"Look me straight in the eye," went on Rock. "Man to man, Dabb. If you have cards on me lay them down. I'm comin' clean honest—and a lot might depend on you doin' the same."

"All right, Rock, I'll meet you," replied Dabb, flushing darkly, evidently stirred. "Straight out then, I've sort of held against you—that old affair of yours and Amy's."

"Good!" exclaimed Rock, cracking a fist on his palm. "That's just what I wanted you to admit. The old women gossips here gave Amy the worst of that affair. She was pretty and vain—and had a way with the boys. But she was good, and if they ever said otherwise they lied. I was in love with Amy, perhaps a little more so than I was with two other girls. But what I want to make clear to you, Dabb, is that Amy was

never serious about me. I mean never in love as it was in her to be. And I'm satisfied that she never has been yet. Even with you—her husband! You'll excuse me, Dabb, but this is blunt straight talk."

"It is, by God!" Dabb said strainedly. "And to what end, Rock?"

"Amy's happiness," flashed Rock. "I met Amy the day I arrived in Wagontongue and again yesterday. She's lonesome and unhappy. I don't believe Amy ever would have married you if she hadn't cared somethin' for you. But you've failed to win the best in her. Dabb, I don't suppose anyone ever dared to hit you this way. I don't care a damn how angry you get, if I can only make you see."

"You're making me see red, cowboy," replied Dabb hoarsely. "But go ahead. I've not the nerve to pull a gun on you."

"Dabb, I always had a hunch you weren't a bad fellow, under your skin. The range claimed you drove hard bargains, and the cowboys didn't exactly like you. All the same, as ranchers go, you sure were white. You're rich now. You don't have to eat, sleep, drink, whistle, and smoke business. Pay some attention to your young and pretty wife! Sol Winter told me you were as gay as any young buckaroo in town. Well, back-trail yourself. Take the girl away occasionally, to Kansas City or Denver. California in winter. And before long, oldtimer, you'll be glad. If you don't do this, sure as I'm sittin' here, Amy is goin' to the bad. That's what I came to say and that's all." Rock ended abruptly, forced by the older man's torture.

Dabb writhed in his chair. Fury and shame contested with the sense of fairness that seemed dragged out of his depths.

"You are a—queer one—Rock," he stammered. "You've hit me where I live, but you talk like a man. And I'm not yet so set in my mind that I can't learn from any man. If the truth turns out as straight as your talk—well, young man, you're on parole till I find out. Now since you've presumed to advise me on a delicate matter, I'll retaliate. Quit Preston!"

"Why?" snapped Rock.

"You know the range, Rock. Some things just can't be said."

"Because they can't be proved."

"Exactly."

"Well, I'll stick to Preston until these damned underhand rumors are proved—or until somebody suffers for startin' them."

"That may work out too late for you. I think I ought to tell you I've broken business relations with Preston."

"When?"

"Last Friday, when Preston was here."

"May I ask what were the business relations?"

"Preston had the small end of a cattle deal with me. I bought him out. And then I canceled all beef orders."

"How did Preston take that?"

"Kicked about the cattle deal. But I took it he was relieved to get out of selling me more beef."

"Relieved—what you mean?"

"He just struck me that way. Didn't ask me why. I was glad. My reason was good, but I could scarcely divulge it to him."

"Mind tellin' me?"

"Yes. I'd mind. It would necessitate violating someone's confidence. You'll have to find out for yourself, Rock."

"Reckon so. Well, I'm such a dumb hombre it may take me long. By the way, Dabb, are you still head of the Territory Cattle Association?"

"No, I resigned. Hesbitt was recently elected."

"Geel! Sorry to hear it."

"Why so? Hesbitt is said to be a better executive than I was."

"He never was a cowboy," returned Rock significantly. "Good day, Dabb. Reckon I'll meet up with you at the rodeo and the dance."

"Likely. I'll drop in on Amy's dance for a couple if I break a leg."

"Now you're shoutin', John."

In the afternoon, rather late, Rock walked 'round to see Winter. He was received almost with open arms.

"Hey, you been drinkin'?" expostulated Rock, holding his friend at arm's length.

"Nope. That is, not red liquor. But I shore been drinkin' in Thiry's sweet smiles an' words."

"Dog-gone! I didn't expect her till tomorrow."

"True, she has been in half a dozen times," went on Winter. "Asked for you *every* time!"

Rock heard Winter, but only vaguely, for he was rushing out to the door, where through the window he had espied Thiry Preston. "Why, hello!" he said, forcing a pleasant surprise to hide his rapture, as he doffed his sombrero. "Heard you were here. Really didn't expect you till tomorrow."

She greeted him shyly, with absence of that inhibited expression which marked her meetings with him at Sunset Pass. She wore a light-blue dress and a new bonnet, the rather wide brim of which shaded her face somewhat. Still, he saw that her cheeks were not pale and her eyes not tranquil.

"We started at daybreak yesterday morning," she was saying. "The boys were no good at all, and the youngsters

simply mad to come—so Dad sent us off a day ahead. Ash stayed home."

"That so?" replied Rock with constraint, though he tingled. "Well. It's too bad, if you're disappointed."

"I'm so greatly relieved I—I don't know myself," she replied, with unexpected candor. "I don't remember a Fourth that Ash hasn't spoiled by getting drunk."

"May I walk with you a step?" asked Rock, changing the subject.

"You may. I'm on my last errand," she replied, and waved a gay hand at Winter.

Rock fell in with her short quick steps and made careful remarks about the weather, and the town being full of people until they reached the baker's, where she said she was to order things for Mrs. Winter.

"I'll wait for you," said Rock.

"Are you afraid to walk into a bake-shop with a girl?" she asked, and the wide bonnet-brim tilted just far enough and long enough for him to catch a flash of gray eyes. "From what I've heard—recently—you could march into a lion's den—for a—for certain people," she said distantly.

"Ahuh, reckon I could—for—for a certain *person*," replied Rock, beginning lamely and ending valiantly. That brought the blue bonnet-brim down to hide most of her face. Rock, however, thought he caught a glimpse of a coloring cheek. He escorted her into the store, stood beside her while she gave her orders, and accompanied her out.

"I'm to wait here for Allie. She won't be long," said Thiry, stopping outside.

"Hope she'll be late," returned Rock.

Presently she lifted her head and Rock devoured her lovely face before he realized it had never worn such an expression for him: doubt, disdain, petulance!

"You're going to the dance," she said. It was not a question.

"Reckon I'll drop in for a peep."

"Would you tell me what you'll wear?" she asked, sweetly—too sweetly not to be dangerous.

"Thiry, that'd spoil the fun. I sure want to fool you," he said.

"Have you not already fooled me?"

"I have not!" he shot at her, swift to speak his sudden passion. It startled her.

"Trueman Rock, you have a great deal to disprove and more to prove," she said, wide strange eyes on his. "You would not tell *me* what you were going to wear—so I'd recognize you first."

"Of course I'll tell you," he burst out.

"I don't care to know now. You would not see *me*, anyhow."

He could only stare mutely.

"Mr. Rock," she went on, without the scorn, "I had better explain my rather bold words. This dance was to be the first gay happy time for me since I grew up. Dad somehow prevented Ash from coming to town. He filled me with—with beliefs about how *you* would make it wonderful for me. I have no one but my brothers, and they all have their girls. I—I dreamed myself into—no matter what. Then I come to town to have my ears filled to burning—all day long. The dance was to be given for you! You wouldn't even dance with any other woman but *her*! You were an old lover renewing his vows! You—"

"Oh no, Thiry, don't say that," he implored.

"Trueman, I meant to dance only with my brothers, and perhaps one or two of the boys I know—and all the rest with you."

"Thiry Preston, you tell me this—this—" he cried, and failed to find adequate conclusion.

"Yes, I tell you," she retorted. "I couldn't do it at home, because I didn't know. But that's no difference."

"Of course it isn't. I should have made some wild dream come true. But, Thiry, it's not too late."

"Oh, it is," she said disconsolately, yet she seemed to hunger to be persuaded. "She has spoiled—"

"Listen," he broke in. "I meant to befriend Amy Dabb. She needs it, heaven knows, as you will see for yourself tomorrow night. But if you let her jealous tongue spoil *anythin'* for you, I'm through."

"Trueman, I could forgive a great deal, I think, but no bold lie," she murmured.

"I would not lie to you, to save my life."

"Perhaps at the dance—then—if you disprove much and prove more I will—"

The arrival of Alice Preston, breathless and pink and merry, checked Rock's impassioned reply that otherwise he could not have resisted, even if Thiry had never completed her thought-compelling sentence. The girls, laughing and talking, started for home, and Rock accompanied them to the corner.

Just before they arrived there, a man and a woman hove in sight. Evidently she was trying to hurry away from him.

"I tell you no—no!" she cried, in a rage. Then Rock recognized the voice and the blazing black eyes. Amy Dabb! The man was a tall rider. He wore a red scarf, and his face was almost as red.

"See heah, sweetheart, you cain't come thet with me," he drawled, blocking her way.

"Shut up, you crazy fool! Someone might hear you," she cried.

Rock with a stride and a leap was upon them. "Somebody did hear you, Amy. Rustle now, with the girls," said Rock, sharply, as he gave the rider a hard thrust backward and then confronted him. "Howdy, Mister Red Scarf!"

CHAPTER TEN

Masquerade

THE red-scarfed rider had evidently had a drink or two, but he appeared level-headed, and slowly the devilish geniality with which he had accosted Amy Dabb faded into cold, watchful speculation. His tawny gaze swept Rock from head to foot, and back again.

"Howdy, Mister Big Hat!" he replied, in imitation of Rock's greeting to him.

"My name is Rock."

"Aboot had thet reckoned," returned the rider guardedly.

"You're Hesbitt's foreman, Peeples," went on Rock curtly. "He told me you were lookin' for me."

"I shore was."

"Ahuh. Reckon you didn't look very hard," rejoined Rock.

"Wal, I cain't say there was any particular call to rustle."

"You're not drunk," replied Rock. "How's it you insult a married woman on the street?"

"Is thet any of your bizness?"

"It shore is. I'm an old friend of Amy Dabb's. Rode for her husband. Reckon it's not exaggeratin' to claim I'm his friend, too."

"All right, Rock, I apologize," returned the foreman readily, though resentfully. "But it shore ain't because I think I ought to."

"I heard what she said, and your answer. Now, tell me square, don't you think it was kind of low-down to brace her, right on the street?"

"Rock, I reckon it was," responded Peeples, staring hard. "An' how aboot my takin' you as a slick hombre—a liar—sweet on her yourself, an' wantin' the inside track?"

"Peeples, you can take me any way you like," responded Rock, speaking hard. "But if you do it that particular way you've got trouble on your hands right now."

"So I aboot reckoned," nodded the rider. "Strikes me I've got to take a lot for granted aboot you. Shore you know more aboot me than I do aboot you. It ain't a very square deal all around."

"I would take your word, if you shook on it," replied Rock.

"Wal, I guess I'd take yours."

"All right, Peeples. We're gettin' somewhere," said Rock more heartily. "Now, Peeples, tell me why you were lookin' for me?"

"Easier'n your other cracks," replied Peeples laconically. "I kept hearin' aboot you out on the range. Then lately you come back an' went to ride for Preston. Thet made me curious, an' I reckon I jest wanted to meet up with you an' see for myself."

"See what?"

"Wal, Rock, do you know one of them queer range shadows is creepin' over the Prestons?"

"I've heard so," replied Rock gloomily. "But I'm hopin' this one will blow over."

"Natural. But if it doesn't—if it clouds up black—you're shore goin' to get rained on, cowboy," said Peeples.

"Peeples, I like Gage Preston," went on Rock. "Do you know him?"

"Shore. Like him fine, too."

"I didn't take to Hesbitt," mused Rock, as if making comparisons.

"Shore I never did, either," admitted Peeples. "But—wal, I'm responsible for his stock. An' you can bet your bottom dollar I'd never be responsible for Preston's. Now about your connection with Preston. Speaks high for him to have you in his outfit. True Rock, clean an' square range-rider! Rode for the best ranchers in the Territory! Sounds awful good when some new cattleman like Hesbitt or some wonderin' puncher gets to talkin'. Rock, if Preston keeps you out there it's a safe bet he *is* rustlin' 'an will rink you in with him, by hook or crook."

"So that's your angle?" muttered Rock, in deep thought. "Suppose I were to tell it to Ash Preston?"

"Wal, you'd drive me into a gun deal. An' you'd be breakin' confidence. After all, Rock, I cain't prove nothin'."

"I'll keep my mouth shut," rejoined Rock, and indeed his lips were tight as he spoke.

The new town hall was the finest structure in Wagontongue, and the civic authorities, who happened to be mostly members of the Cattle Association, were proud of it and its expression of a progressive and prosperous community.

It was of Spanish design, low, rambling, many arched and aisled, painted white, with red tiled roof. Two aisles with arched walls formed the outside of a large *patio*. Here and everywhere gay many-colored Chinese lanterns hung, singly from the tops of the arches, and in strings across from wall to wall. Flowers and desert shrubbery lined the walks and circled the fountain, where water tinkled musically.

Trueman Rock strolled from the town hall, which he had inspected along with a multitude of visitors, back to his hotel. The street was full of people.

Lobby and saloon were noisy, smoky. He went to his room to avoid the crowd. When he left it next he would be in masquerade.

Darkness had long set in when he left the hotel. Rock ran the gauntlet of merry jests, admiring glances from dusky eyes, laughter and query, to the entrance at the main corridor of the hall. Inside the door was a gate, guarded by men, one of whom was the town sheriff, very important and pompous, with his silver badge conspicuous. Two placards struck Rock's eye. One read: NO ADMITTANCE TO ANYONE NOT IN MASQUERADE. And the other sign, larger, read: CHECK YOUR HARDWARE AND BOTTLE.

"Howdy, gambler!" greeted the sheriff. "'Scuse me while I search you. Mrs. Dabb's orders."

His second slap at Rock located the gun under the long frock coat. "Ha! Not on the hip! Hangin' low, eh? Wal, cowboy, unbuckle an' pass."

The heavy gun belt went into the hands of an attendant, who deposited it on a shelf where already a row of weapons glittered. Rock received a ticket.

Rock passed on down the corridor to where it opened into the *patio*. There was music somewhere and sound of voices and laughter. The lights from the lanterns were just strong enough to lend glamour and softness to the Spanish aisles, the beautiful *patio* and the brightly clad maskers.

A girl, slight of stature, passed Rock to peer at him with challenging eyes, disguised if not hidden by a red mask. Her costume was Spanish, gold and black, very graceful and pretty. It could not be Amy, for surely she would wear something magnificent. She passed on,

and Rock forgot her in his growing, searching gaze for someone he would know the instant she appeared.

Someone took his arm lightly. "*Buenas tardes, señor,*" said a low voice at his elbow.

Rock bowed gallantly to the slim creature on his arm. He did not recognize her, but saw that she was the Spanish girl in gold and black.

"*Buenas tardes, señorita,*" replied Rock, peering into the black holes in the red mask.

She averted her face and walked with him, surely aware of the attention they roused. Rock grasped suddenly that there appeared to be a little pressure on his arm, a gradual but sure guidance of his steps. He was to find that they were entering the dance-hall, where many masqueraders had assembled.

This Spanish girl was enterprising, not to say bold. Then the orchestra burst into music, a languorous Spanish waltz, once Rock's great favorite.

The girl who had led him there swayed to the rhythm toward him, slowly lifting her hand to his shoulder. "You handsome gambler! You don't know me!" she cried in arch reproach.

"Amy!" exclaimed Rock incredulously.

"Not a soul recognized me," she said, in delight. "I'll tell no one but you. Come, this is your old favorite waltz."

Before Rock knew what was happening she was in his arms, light as thistledown, and they were whirling, gliding to dreamy strains that found the old chord deep in his memory.

"Trueman, hold me tighter," she whispered, and leaned back against his arm, to look up at him. The dark eyes seemed inscrutable wells under the red mask.

"Behave yourself, Mrs. Dabb," he returned warningly, with a laugh.

"Well, if you won't, I'll have to hug you," she went on. "Oh, I could hug you and kiss you before everybody! Trueman, *what* did you do to my husband?"

"Did I do anythin'?" asked Rock.

"Did you? Trueman, he came home the other day, at noon—something unheard of," she went on swiftly. "He told me you'd been in to see him. That you had raked him over the coals. That you had cleared up something about you and me! Then he told me he had been sore and jealous for a long time. He admitted being mean, selfish, suspicious. He'd neglected me shamefully. He would turn over a new leaf. He would try to be young again. Since then he has been like he was when he courted me. And most amazing of all, he's to drop in here tonight—in masquerade. He wouldn't even tell what he'd wear."

"Good Lord!" said Rock under his breath.

"You should say thank the good Lord. How'd you do it, old boy? It's a miracle. And maybe it's not too late. I was, I guess, on the ragged edge."

"All past, Amy," he said cheerfully.

"I don't know, Trueman. But I'm happy tonight—as I haven't been in years." Then, leaning her head forward to his shoulder, she grew silent. Round and round they swung amid the colorful murmuring throng. The scrape and thud of cowboy boots drowned the patter and slide of lighter-footed dancers. Then suddenly the music ceased.

Amy must have had certain duties as a hostess, for outside she slipped away from Rock and mingled with the laughing, curious assemblage. He was at the entrance to the *patio*, standing close to the wall, when a small party entered the corridor and came quickly down.

"Look!" spoke up a woman to her

neighbor on a bench near Rock. "That girl in white. Colonial wedding-gown! Isn't she just lovely? Who can it be?"

This remark caused Rock to take a second glance at the entering party. It struck him that the girl in the wedding-gown was certainly worth looking at. At first she did not appear to be masked at all, but as she drew closer he saw that she wore a close-fitting mask, scarcely any whiter than her powdered face.

Her hair was done up in some amazing style and as colorless as snow. Arms and neck, of exquisite contour, likewise were of a dazzling whiteness. The gown, one of those hoop-skirted, many-ruffled affairs Rock had seen in pictures, took up the space of three ordinarily dressed women. Indeed, there appeared scarcely space enough for the girl to pass him.

Trueman flattened himself against the wall, as he had observed the two cowboys do. Nevertheless, the young lady was forced to sweep her skirts aside to avoid contact. The momentary halting of the party, evidently to choose a direction, brought this Colonial masquerader so close to Rock that he meant to step forward and allow her more room. But she seemed to be looking at him and he felt suddenly rooted to the spot.

They turned, some of them laughing, and the wonderful girl in white pressed close to Rock in passing, still apparently gazing at him. As the soft, fluffy, perfumed gown swept him, Rock felt a hand touch his—slip a folded paper into his palm with quick pressure. Then she passed and he leaned there staring.

Rock's trembling fingers tightened on the paper. It was a note. That girl had been Thiry. In one glance she had pierced

his disguise. And he had been far indeed from returning the compliment. What a joke on him!

Coming down to earth with a jerk, Rock peered into his palm at the note, then rushed off to find a light by which he could read it. Finally he found one under which he thought he could discern the writing, and here, after a keen glance, around, he opened the note.

Dear Trueman:

I will know you the instant I lay eyes on you. Will you me? I am in terrible fear, but I will come to the dance, 'cost what it may.

Ash is in town, hiding. I do not know what he means. It may be there is some other reason for his action. Allie and I will go to the Farrells' to dress, and come with their crowd.

Ash never saw my great-grandmother's wedding-dress. He won't recognize me, when he comes. For he will come! You must keep close watch over me, else I would not dare take the risk. I will dance with the Farrell boys a little—the rest with you. I shall not stay till they unmask. I want to go before he knows me. You must take me away before that.

It may be madness. But I let my heart become set on this one dance. I grow furious at the thought of giving it up. I don't know myself of late. I will come—if only to—

Thiry.

Rock did not draw a breath during his swift perusal of this note. Though he could not believe he was awake the words were there, on white paper, in ink, clear and firm, in even, beautiful script.

Rock placed the note inside his vest and strode back toward the corridor.

As he entered it, Thiry came out of a doorway halfway down and seemed to float toward him. They met, both aware of others present. Rock, removing his hat, made her an elaborate bow.

"Lady from Virginia, I salute you," he said gallantly.

"Sir Knight of the Card Table," she replied, and offered her hand.

Rock clasped it and kissed it with the old-fashioned courtesy due the character she personified. But they acted no more. She seemed silently confused as he led her to the *patio*. There in the subdued glow of the lanterns they were comparatively alone.

"Thiry!" he said. "I didn't know you. I didn't *know* you. And, oh, how lovely you look!"

She murmured her thanks. They stood under an archway beside the fountain. The falling water tinkled in harmony with the soft strains of music.

"How ever did you know me?" he asked.

"It was the way you stood."

The music ceased and the gay dancers poured out of the hall to promenade in couples and quartets and crowds, all intent, it appeared, to peep under masks and find one another out.

"My brothers—the twins and Al—and the Farrell boys know me, of course," said Thiry, as if remembering where she was. "We must find them. Then after a few dances I'll be free—if—if you—"

"Thiry, there's no if—now or ever," he replied unsteadily.

"Will you dance while I dance?"

"No. I'll watch you—and see if anyone else is watchin' you."

"Oh, but surely you must *want* to dance some?" she queried.

"Only with you."

"Not Amy Dabb?" she flashed.

"Not Amy Dabb," he said, turning to find her face averted.

"But, Truceman, she is your hostess. If I remember correctly, she meant to embody the duty of all her masculine guests in *your* attendance."

"Reckon she was just talkin'."

"Then *I* was wrong to believe her. Forgive me. But I didn't see how you could be so—so—such a liar."

"Thiry, I couldn't lie to you," he returned, with low voice ringing. "Save me agony by believin' that now. For some day you'll know."

"But you must dance with your hostess—at least once," said Thiry, hastily.

"Once. Would you stand for it once? I mean, straight out—do you *want* me to dance with you instead of Amy Dabb?"

"Yes, I do," she returned hotly. "She hurt me. She said catty things all in a nice way. She offered to lend me a dress. She made me feel a—a country bumpkin. I told you before what she hinted about you. It's selfish, little, miserable of me to want to show her. But she made me almost hate her."

"Thiry, my obligation is paid," replied Rock, trying to contain himself. "I have had that one dance with Mrs. Dabb. She met me. I didn't recognize her until she made herself known. It's over. So there."

"I'd like you to dance with Allie," returned Thiry shyly. "She won't tell on you. For that matter, it'd be fun, if we can fool her."

"Fine. Let's find her and your friends."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bare Fists

THIRY had introduced Rock to her sister Alice as Señor del Toro of Las Vegas. And Rock felt that so far as

dancing was concerned he had acquitted himself creditably. Alice was like a fairy on her feet and Rock could not have forced her out of step if he had tried.

The dance was soon over, and Rock surrendered Allie to her next partner. He became all eyes then. He shifted in one moment to the cool, searching cowboy on a trail. His searching gaze was concerned with the masculine element of that gay crowd.

He lounged around the door of the hall during two dances before he convinced himself that Ash was not among the cowboys dancing. Then he strolled down one long aisle and up the other, peering at every man and into every shadow. Likewise he searched the *patio*. Then he went into the corridor and toward the entrance, where the sheriff and his deputies still held forth.

When Ash Preston came in he would have to be masked and he could not hide a gun from those laconic Westerners. This afforded Rock relief! Returning to his post just inside the dance-hall door, he took up his vigil there.

Then Rock espied Thiry, conspicuous in white and notable for her grace. She was dancing with one of the lanky youths with whom she and Alice had come! As they came around in the gliding circle she espied Rock over her partner's arm. What a smile she gave Rock! It made his heart beat faster. Probably for the hour she had forgotten the menace of Ash Preston! Soon that dance ended, and as the laughing throng pressed in a stream out the door, someone—a woman—thrust her face close under Rock's.

"Traitor!" she whispered, and went on. The wine-dark hot eyes, through the red mask, the gold-and-black Spanish

gown, so striking on the slender figure, belonged to Amy Dabb.

Trueman whistled to keep from swearing. He had actually forgotten Amy. Dance after dance had gone by, and he had never even seen her. His dismay was short-lived, in that he looked around from the disappearing Amy to see Thiry close at hand, coming alone.

"Señor del Toro, you look lonesome," she said gayly. "Are there no charming señoritas here?"

"I can see only one."

"Come. The rest is yours," she said, and took his arm.

She was in his arms. She yielded to, rather than resisted, the close embrace he could not have forsworn to save his life. That dance was brief as a fleeting moment, but endless in its intangible mystery and joy.

Again they strolled under the magic rose and purple of the dimming lanterns, and on to the secluded bower in the *patio*. Here the stars shone white and watchful through the foliage. The water tinkled off in the darkness.

Trueman took her hand in his. It was an almost instinctive action on his part. She made no attempt to withdraw it, greatly to his joy.

"Trueman, you must take me home soon," she said, as if coming out of a spell.

"Oh no, not now. Just one more dance," pleaded Rock. "You said the rest were mine."

"But I'd forgotten."

"What?"

"Ash will come any moment."

"Thiry, he is not here now. I've looked clear through every man in the outfit. Please risk it."

"Well, then—one more."

But at the end of this dance she forgot again or could not resist the joy of the hour. Once more Rock led her to their shadowed corner, once more he held an unresisting hand.

Rock won her to stay one more dance, reveled in his power to persuade her, though his conscience flayed him. What risk he might incur for her! But he gambled with his happiness.

"Trueman, we must go now," she said nervously.

"Yes. But don't you hate to?" he returned jealously.

"No. I'm too thankful for—for all it's been."

They reached the *patio*. Something had happened, as Rock guessed from excited voices. A girl cried out in dismay.

"Hey, look out there!" called someone, unmistakably a cowboy.

"He snatched at my mask," replied a girl, angrily.

"He got mine," added another woman.

Rock drew Thiry out of the press. "Some cowboy snatchin' masks," he said hurriedly.

Suddenly into the open space before him leaped a lithe figure of a cowboy, wearing a red handkerchief as a mask. He was as quick as light—so quick that Rock scarcely guessed his purpose in time to thwart it. But Rock was on the wrong side of Thiry. One sweep of hand tore Thiry's mask from her white face! She cried out and spasmodically clutched Rock's arm.

The cowboy appeared to leap up. He snatched off the red handkerchief that masked him, to disclose the livid face of Ash Preston. His evil eyes, like coals of blue fire, flashed over her face, her bare neck and arms, her spreading ruffled gown.

"Ash," gasped Thiry, clutching Rock's arm tighter, "meet Señor del Toro—my masquerade partner!"

"Señor Hell!" he bit out, incredibly cold and fierce. Like a snake's head his hand shot out, to fasten in Thiry's bodice and tear with fiendish swiftness.

In one action Rock freed himself from Thiry and struck Preston on the side of the face. He went down with a thud. Women screamed; men shouted excitedly; and all spread back hurriedly. Up bounded Preston, with catlike quickness, his hand flashing back for his gun. But it was not there. He had passed the sheriff and had forgotten. His wolfish face gleamed fiercer.

"Greaser, I'll kill you for thet!" he ground out.

"*Caramba!*" replied Rock, and made at Preston with terrific fury. His onslaught was like a battering-ram. He cared nothing for Preston's sudden blows. He broke through them, beat him back, and knocked him against the wall. Ash fell, but got up cursing, to come back wilder than ever, his face the redder for blood. There was a swift interchange of blows, then one from Rock staggered Preston. Another swift and hard, hitting solid like an ax on beef, sent Preston in a long fall.

Before he could rise Rock plunged upon him, beat him with right, left, right, left—tremendous blows that made Ash sink limp. Rock seized him by the neck, choked and shook him as a terrier with a rat, and rising, dragged him to the fountain and threw him bodily into the shallow water. Ash lay on his back, his head just above the surface.

Rock, remembering his mask, felt for it and found it intact. That helped release him from the grip of an awful

anger. Thiry's white mask lay where Preston had dropped it. Snatching it up, Rock whirled to see some woman in the act of covering Thiry's naked shoulders and bosom with a shawl.

"Come—we'll—get out—of here," he panted hoarsely, and placing a firm hand under her arm he led her away from the gaping crowd, down the corridor toward the outlet. Rock halted long enough to produce his check and get his gun belt.

"What's up in thar?" queried the sheriff, sharply eying Rock.

"Some fool cowboy snatchin' masks off the ladies," replied Rock, and hurried Thiry out through the crowd of Mexicans to the street and darkness.

Thiry was weak. She leaned on his arm. Still she kept up with his rapid steps. Not for three blocks did Rock speak, nor did she.

"He—didn't know you," she burst out, then. "Called you greaser!"

"Yes, that's the only good thing about it," returned Rock.

"Trueman, I shouldn't have gone. I knew something dreadful would happen. I told you. Only he was worse than I ever saw him."

"Worse! He was a hydrophobia skunk!"

"Oh, Ash! My brother!" she cried brokenly.

Her grief tortured Rock, but he did not have it in him to retract his words. What language could do justice to Ash Preston? They hurried on, to the edge of town, down the pine-skirted road. Presently they reached Winter's house, which sat back among the trees. He wanted to say good night to Thiry at the gate, but could not. She still clung to him. At the porch he halted, and helped her up.

It was shaded there by trees, but he

could still see her pale face, and the great eyes, strange and dark in the night. Before he knew what he was doing he clasped his arms round her, as she stood a little above him.

"Forgive me, Thiry," he implored.

"There's nothing to forgive."

"I'll go to my room before anyone sees me. Ash didn't know me. He never will."

"She will tell," said Thiry hopelessly.

"Amy Dabbl!" exclaimed Rock, with a start. "She did know. But she'll have no chance tonight. They'll pack him out of there pronto. Tomorrow I'll find some way to shut her mouth."

"Yes, you will," said Thiry, with sad derision. "Don't waste your breath, Trueman. Perhaps it will not occur to her that Ash didn't know you."

"Then let's hope for the best." Rock tightened his arms a little, drew her closer. "Thiry, kiss me good night," he whispered.

Blindly, with unreckoning impulse, she bent and met his upturned lips with her own. Quickly, with a gasp, she broke away to stare a moment, as if some realization had stricken her, then she fled across the porch and into the house.

Ash Preston did not return to Sunset Pass for a week after the Fourth. Rumor drifted down by a rider that Preston was hunting for the Mexican who had beaten him at the dance.

It was an anxious and brooding time for Trueman Rock, more, perhaps, because of Thiry's unconcealed dread than for his own sake. Nevertheless, he never drew an easy breath, despite the rumor, until Ash returned, sober yet showing the effects of a prolonged debauch.

One moment Rock stood on the porch, his hand quivering, while Ash

strode over from his cabin. Sullen, his face black and blue, still swollen, he presented no encouraging aspect. But manifestly that moment proved he did not know or suspect Rock had been his assailant. Then the suspense of this meeting for Rock ended when Thiry almost fainted in Ash's arms.

Rock did not tarry with the family after supper that night. He carried away with him a look from Thiry's eyes and it drove him to pace under the pines, to throw back his head, to fill his lungs with the sage-laden air of the Pass, to cast exultant defiance up at the silent, passionless white stars.

He paced a beat from the open back to the gloom of the thick-spreading trees. On the soft mats of pine needles his feet made no sound; against the black shadow of the slope his figure could not be seen. But his own sharp eye caught a dark form crossing in front of a cabin light. He heard a voice low but clear—Gage Preston's: "Ash, come hyar."

Suddenly he made them out, perilously close upon him. Silently he sank behind the log, immensely glad that it lay between him and the approaching men.

"What do you want?" growled Ash.

"Sit down there," ordered Preston.

Rock felt the jar of the log where evidently Preston had pushed Ash. Noiselessly craning his neck, Rock saw the dim figure of the father, bending over. Then Rock espied Ash sitting not ten feet from where he lay.

"What the hell's got into you?" demanded Ash.

"What the hell's got into *you*—thet you hang on in town, lookin' for trouble, makin' more fer me?" countered the father sternly. "I needed you hyar. There's work no one else can do."

"But, Pa, I wanted to kill thet Señor del Toro," protested Ash, almost plaintively.

"Bah! Señor del Toro? Why, you lunkhead, thet make-believe Spaniard was Trueman Rock!"

"Hell, no!" snapped Ash, hotly. "I had thet hunch. But I was wrong. Next mornin' I went to Thiry. I told her thet black-masked pardner of hers was Rock an' I was a-goin' to kill him. She fell on her knees. An' she wrapped her arms around me. An' she swore to God it wasn't Rock. Pa, I had to believe her. Thiry never lied in her life."

"Mebbe I'm wrong," choked Preston, as if a will not his own wretched that admission from him. "But whoever he was he gave you plumb what I'd have given you. You disgraced Thiry. You shamed her. You hurt her so she's been ill. She—who's loved you all her life!"

"Shet up, Pa," wailed Ash, writhing, "I can stand anythin' but thet."

"Wal, you shore have a queer streak in you. Yellow clear through when it comes to Thiry. But fer her you'd be a man. An' we could go on with our work thet's callin' fer all a man's brains. You can't be relied upon, as you used to be. Now listen, somethin's up out there on the range. I've done some scoutin' around lately. I've talked with the Mexican sheepherders. Too many riders snoopin' around Sunset Pass! Today I seen some of Hesbitt's outfit. An' Slagle asked me sarcastic like why Clink Peeples was over hyar so much."

"Clink Peeples had better keep away from the Pass."

"There you go again. What good will it do to throw a gun on Peeples? If they're suspicious, thet'd only make them worse. What'd you do with them last Half Moon hides?"

"I hid them."

"Where? Didn't you take them to Limestone Cave, as I ordered you?"

"I packed some there. It was too far, an' I was tuckered out. I hid the rest under the culvert."

"But I told you not to hide any more there. I always was scared of the culvert. Once a big rain washed some out. It could happen again."

"Wal, it ain't too late. I'll take Boots tomorrow night, an' we'll pack the fresh ones over to Limestone."

"No. The ground's soft since it rained. You'd leave tracks. An' that's too risky with these new riders searchin' around. Better leave them. An' we'll lay off butcherin' fer a spell."

"Lay off nothin'. With all them orders fer beef? I guess not. Pa, there's room fer a thousand hides down in the old well."

"Ash, I tell you we'll lay off killin' till this suspicion dies down."

"Wal, I won't lay off, an' I reckon I can boss the boys," replied Ash implacably.

Then Preston cursed him, cursed him with every hard word known to the range, and some besides, cursed until he was spent from passion.

"This hyar rider, Rock," spoke up Ash, as if he had never heard the storm of profanity, "when you goin' to fire him?"

"Rock?" Not at all," replied Preston wearily. He was beaten.

"Wal, then, I will. He's been around too long, watchin' Thiry, an' mebbe us, too."

"Ash, haven't you sense enough to see that Rock's bein' hyar is good fer us?" asked Preston, girding himself afresh. "Never was a rider hyar so trusted as Rock. That diverts suspicion from us. It was lucky he came."

"But he might find us out."

"It ain't likely. Shore he doesn't want to."

"He might stumble on to it by accident. Or get around Thiry an' scare it out of her."

"Wal, if he *did*, that wouldn't be so bad. She could keep his mouth shut. He loves her well enough to come in with us. Only I'd hate to ask her to do it."

"An' if she did win him over, what would *he* want?" hissed Ash.

"Huh? Reckon that's easy to answer. An' I'm telling you, Ash, Thiry would like Rock if she had half a chance."

"She'd like him, huh? So that's why she made me promise not to pick a fight with him—"

"Wal, Ash, if circumstances come up we can't help or beat, what'n hell can we do? I told you ages ago that Thiry is bound some day to love some lucky rider. It can't be helped. An' it might be Rock. Which'd be most infernal lucky fer us."

"Lucky fer him! Haw! Haw!—I'd shoot his heart out."

Preston rose to loom menacingly over his son. "You can't murder him in his sleep, or shoot him in the back. That'd look bad in Wagontongue. It'd just about ruin us. An' if you call him out to an even break—why, Ash, he'll kill you! Savvy! Rock is cold as ice, as quick as lightnin'. He has a hawk eye. I'm warnin' you, Ash."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rock Calls a Bluff

LONG after Preston stalked away Rock lay behind the log, thinking over the peril he had been in and the revelation that had accompanied it. Late he stole like an Indian to his cabin, made his bed inside, and barring the door, lay down just as he was.

In the morning he watched from his window until Ash left, then went out to breakfast. Thiry did not appear.

Preston came out while Rock was eating and said, "Rock, I've a job for you that'll take you away some time. The boys are gettin' a pack outfit ready. They know where to go. I want five hundred head of two-year-old steers in the flat down there by Slagle's ranch. By August."

"You're the boss, Preston. But are you sure you won't need me more right here?"

Preston bent toward Rock and lowered his voice. "It ain't what I'd like or need. I had no idee last night that I'd send you off this mornin'. But it popped into my head."

"Ahuh! Who popped it?"

"Thiry. She asked me to. Ash is wuss then ever before. An' fer once Thiry seemed to be thinkin' of somebody else but him."

Rock repaired to his cabin and rolled his bed and packed the things he would need. In half an hour he sat astride Egypt, bound down the Pass. This trip would be a welcome respite, and from every angle favorable for him. Two hours later he was climbing the benches into the black timber, and late that afternoon he halted with the boys in a wild and sylvan spot to make a permanent camp.

"Boys, your dad has stuck us with a job he thinks we can't do," observed Rock at the campfire. "Five hundred head of two-year-olds by August."

"Can't be did," replied Tom.

"By thunder! What's eatin' Dad these days?" exclaimed Harry.

"Let's fool him once," added Al, with spirit. "There's another dance in town along early in August. An' if you-all

want a hunch—there's Somebody who says I gotta be on hand."

"That's the talk, Al," said Rock. "If we can find a canyon or draw somewhere close we'll drive what we round up each day, and fence them in."

"Good big draw over here. Water an' grass. Once been fenced in, but the poles are down. Reckon we could fix it up pronto."

Before they went to bed Rock had imbued the brothers with something of his own will to do or die. Next morning they were up in the dark, had breakfast before sunrise, and on the drive when the first tinges of rose colored the rims of the Pass.

One night Al got in latest of all, weary and sullen. Rock knew something untoward had happened, but he waited until the lad had eaten and rested.

"What did you run up on today, cowboy?" queried Rock, at length.

"I was up under the Notch," replied Al, "an' first thing I seen a couple of riders high up, watchin' me. Reckon they never lost sight of me all day."

Three days later, miles east of the Notch, Rock's alert eye caught sight of riders above him on a slope, keeping behind the trees, and no doubt spying upon him with a glass. Though boiling with rage, he went right on driving as if he were none the wiser.

Then, a couple of days before the full 500 head had been herded into the canyon-corral, the thing Rock expected came to pass. Early in the morning, at breakfast hour, a group of riders, five in number, rode down upon the camp.

"Boys, reckon I don't like this," said Rock gruffly. "But you take it natural-like, and I'll do the talkin'."

As the riders entered camp Rock rose from his seat beside the campfire

to greet the visitors. They were seasoned range-riders, a hard-looking quintet, not one of whom Rock had ever seen. They probably belonged to the Wyoming outfit which had come from the north with Hesbitt. It took no second glance for Rock to decide they did not know him by sight or reputation.

"Howdy! Just in time for grub," he said heartily.

"Much obliged, but we had ourn," replied the leader, a bronzed, rugged cowman, with bright bold eyes that roved everywhere. "Gage Preston outfit?"

"Part of it," replied Rock, not so cordially.

"Roundup or drivin' a herd?" went on the interlocutor.

"We're drivin' five hundred head of two-year-olds down the Pass. Reckon another day or so will make the full count," rejoined Rock.

"Big job for so few punchers. Where you got the herd bunched?"

"We fenced a canyon across the creek," returned Rock, pointing eastward.

"Don't know the lay of the land," went on the leader. "Haven't rid long on this range."

"Shore you didn't have to tell me that," replied Rock bluntly. "You're from Wyomin', an' ridin' for Hesbitt."

"How'd you know that?"

"Reckon nobody else would brace me this way."

"You? Which one of the Prestons might you be? I've seen Ash Preston out on the range, an' you're shore not him."

"I might be any one of the other six Prestons," rejoined Rock with dry sarcasm. "Haden't you better hand over your callin'-card before askin' me to introduce myself?"

"I'm Jim Dunne, foreman for Hesbitt," replied the rider.

"All right. How do, Mr. Dunne? A blind cowboy could see your call isn't friendly. Now what do you want?"

"Wal, we've come over to have a look at your herd," answered Dunne.

"Ahuh!" Rock strode halfway across the camp space to confront Dunne. "Just to see if by accident we didn't round up a couple of Half Moon steers? Dunne, you bet your life you're goin' to look over our herd. Then I'll call you plumb straight."

One of Dunne's men whispered to him, with visible effect.

"Say, are you this fellar Rock?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, I'm Rock. Reckon that doesn't mean anythin' to you. But maybe it will later."

"Wal, I can't see as there's any reason to be riled," returned Dunne evidently now wanting to conciliate Rock.

"That's because you don't know this range," said Rock curtly, and then turned to the Preston brothers. "Boys, we'll drive the steers out of the canyon for inspection. We'll head them down into the Pass. Then we'll pack and go on in."

Rock relentlessly held the Half Moon outfit on both sides of the corral gate while the cowboys drove the steers out in single files and in twos and threes. It was Rock's task to head them down toward the Pass, which was easy after the leaders got started.

Dunne made several weak attempts to call off the inspection, but Rock rigorously held him and his men to a count of every steer that passed the gateway. It was a long, tedious job.

"Dunne, between you all you've seen every head of stock we've driven," said Rock, when he had dismounted to face the men. "You didn't see one Half Moon brand, did you?"

"Can't say I did."

"And you punchers? Neither did you?"

"No, Rock, we didn't," replied the one who had whispered to Dunne. "An' if we'd had our way this deal wouldn't hev come off."

"All right, Dunne, go for your gun!" commanded Rock.

"What!" ejaculated Dunne hoarsely, his face turning yellow.

"Can't you hear? Any man who thinks me a rustler has got to back it with his gun."

"Rock, I—I—we— Throwin' guns wasn't in my orders."

"Dunne, you don't fit on this range," replied Rock, in bitter scorn. "Keep out of my way hereafter." Then he turned to the other riders. "Reckon you're not willin' parties to this raw deal Dunne gave me. Any self-respectin' cowboy, if he calls another a rustler, knows it's true and is ready to fight. Tell Hesbitt exactly what happened here. Tell him gossip on the range isn't proof of an outfit's guilt."

"All right, Rock, we'll shore give Hesbitt the straight of this," replied the rider.

The four mounted men rode away, and Dunne made haste to get astride and follow.

On the third day following, early in the afternoon, Rock and his cowboys left the herd of steers in the meadowland below Slagle's ranch, and rode on home, a weary and silent four.

Rock asked the brothers to keep their mouths shut, but strict observance of their promises was not likely. Indeed, by the time he had shaved and changed his clothes, there came rapid footfalls, followed by a thump on his cabin door.

Rock slid back the bar, whereupon

Preston stamped in, with Ash close behind him.

"Howdy, boss!" said Rock cheerfully, and nodded to Ash.

"Al busted in with a wild story," broke out Preston. "Said Hesbitt's outfit spied on you while you was drivin'?" Then they rode into your camp. Five of them. Fellar named Dunne in charge. Al says you made him inspect every steer you had—an' after that dared him to throw a gun. Al was terrible excited. Rock, was he just loco, or is he exaggeratin' a little run-in you had with one of Hesbitt's outfits?"

"Boss, Al told the truth, and put it mild at that," replied Rock, and turned to tie his scarf before the mirror. In the glass he saw Preston's eyes roll and fix with terrible accusation upon his son. "Sit down, both of you," went on Rock, and presently faced them again.

Ash was coolly rolling a cigarette, his face a mask. Preston had been drinking of late, but appeared sober, and now, though grim and angry, met Rock's glance steadily.

Rock began a minute narrative of the situation from the day Al caught the two riders spying upon him from the slope.

Preston paced the room, gazing down at the bare rough-hewn floor. "Reckon this hyar deal wouldn't be particular bad fer me if it wasn't fer our butcherin' bizness," he remarked, as if thoughtfully to himself.

Rock, however, divined that was a calculating speech. "You hit it, Gage. There's the rub. My hunch is you must quit the butcherin'," said Rock deliberately, his eye on Ash.

"I will, by thunder!" replied the rancher, wheeling instinctively to face his son.

Ash rose out of the cloud of smoke,

At that moment, for Trueman Rock, nothing in the world could have been so desirable as to smash that face. Ash took no notice of his father's decision. He flipped his cigarette butt almost at Rock. "I'm butcherin' tomorrow, Mister Rock," he asserted.

"Butcher and be darned!" retorted Rock, absolutely mimicking the other's tone.

"You're gettin' too thick out here," said Ash, backing to the door, which he opened. "I told you once to clear out. This's the second time. There won't never be no third." He backed out the door, then stalked off the porch toward his cabin.

"Gage, that bullheaded son of yours will be the ruin of you," said Rock, turning to the rancher.

"Lord! don't I know it!" groaned Preston from under his huge hands.

Rock remained away from the supper table, though the second bell rang. He found in his pack enough to satisfy him. He did not feel hunger. It was a trying hour as he watched from his window.

Presently Rock saw Preston, accompanied by Thiry, come out of his cabin and cross over to enter Ash's. A light flashed from the window. Rock's first thought was to creep under that window and listen. But for risk to Thiry he would have done so; however, he decided to go down through the grove and come up between Ash's cabin and Thiry's, and wait for her.

It was quite dark when he slipped out. He stole among the trees, and making a half-circle he came up to the bench under Thiry's pine, and sat down there to wait, thrilling with anticipation of soon seeing her white form emerge from the blackness.

But an hour passed. She did not come. Another went by! The light burned in Ash's window, and now and then a dark form cast a shadow. The conference was still going on. Rock knew surely that Thiry had not left Ash's cabin; he had watched for that, all the time he had circled it.

It might have been long after midnight when Rock heard a door close. He waited, straining eyes and ears, beginning to wonder if he had been mistaken about not missing Thiry. Another door closed, and that he was sure had come from Preston's cabin. How pitch black it was at a little distance! Then out of the blackness a slender vague shape glided, like a specter. The darkness was deceptive.

Rock let her get right upon him, so close he could have touched her, and his heart suddenly contracted violently. "Thiry! Thiry!" he whispered, unable to make his voice clear or steady.

"You!" she cried, and seemed to loom on him out of the shadows. Her arms swept wide and that extraordinary action paralyzed Rock. The next instant they closed 'round his neck.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Solution?

SCARCELY had Thiry clasped him when she uttered a cry and released the convulsive hold, her hands unlocking and sliding down from each shoulder as if bereft of strength.

Taking her hand, Rock led her to a seat on the bench under the pine, where she sank almost in collapse, her head bowed. Rock resisted his natural impulses—crushed down the exultation of the moment.

"Thiry, why did you—do that?"

"Trueman, how can I explain what

"I scarcely realize?" she said with pathos. "I'd been hours with Dad and Ash. Oh, it was sickening. We begged—we prayed Ash to give up—plans he has. He was a fiend. So was Dad. But I kept trying till I was exhausted. It must be two o'clock. As I came across to my cabin I was thinking of how you met that Half Moon outfit. How you resented suspicion against Dad! I was wondering how I should thank you—tomorrow. Then you rose right out of the black ground. And when you spoke I—I just—" She faltered and broke off leaving him to guess the rest.

Rock's compassion overcame him. "I love you. Tell me what weighs so upon you."

"Oh, I would if I dared," she whispered.

"Thiry, you might dare anythin' on my love," he began.

"Oh no—no! If it were only myself!"

"Thiry, there are only two people in all the world—you and me."

"How silly, Trueman. You *are* selfish."

"Well, if it's selfish to love you, worship you, to want your burdens on my shoulders, to save you from trouble, disgrace—to make you happy—then indeed I am selfish."

It did not take much of a pull to get her into his arms, and in another moment he had her helpless, lifting her from the ground, her face close under his.

"Thiry, don't you love me a very little?" he asked, deep tenderness thrilling in his voice.

"I couldn't hate you. Please let that do. Let me go—before it's too—"

"It is too late, Thiry, for both of us," he whispered passionately, and he kissed her lips—and then again, with all the longing that consumed him.

"Now will you confess you love me—a little?" he asked huskily.

"O God help me—I do—I do!"

"More than a little? Thiry, I didn't expect much. Sure I don't deserve it—but tell me."

"Yes, more." And she twisted to hide her face, while her left arm slowly crept up his shoulder, and went half 'round his neck. "That's what was the matter with me."

Lifting her head he turned her face to his.

How slowly she lifted her pale face, with eyes like black stars! In the sweet fire of her lips Rock gained his heart's desire.

Then she lay in his arms, her face hidden, while he gazed out into the stormy night, across the black Pass to the dim flares along the battlements of the range. His victory brought happiness and sorrow commingled. But the precious form in his arms, the mortal flesh that embodied and treasured an infinitely more precious gift—her love—lifted his spirit and bade him go on.

"Thiry, you are keepin' Ash's and your father's secret from all."

"Trueman," she cried, as if her own mind had deceived her ears.

"They are cattle thieves. Beef thieves. So are your brothers Range, Scoot and Boots, along with them."

"O my God! You know!" she almost screamed, and slipped to her knees before him.

"I suspected it when I first came. I found signs. Quicklime! That made me suspicious. Slagle's well is half full of hides. Sure those hides have not the Preston brand. Then over near where they butchered last I came on the same boot track that I'd seen down near the slaughterhouse. I trailed that track. It

led under a culvert. There I found hundreds of hides, tied up in burlap sacks. I opened one. That hide had a Half Moon brand! Down here at your barn, one day after the dance, I measured Ash's boot track. It was the same as that one I'd trailed. But for real proof, I heard your Dad and Ash talkin' together. They gave it all away."

"I knew—it would come. It will—kill me," she wailed brokenly. "Oh, to make love to me—while you were spying on my brother—my father!"

"Reckon it does look pretty bad to you. But it's not so bad as it looks—so far as I'm concerned. But, Thiry, you're in this secret and you would be held guilty in some degree in court, if your part in it was found out. And let me tell you Ash would hold no secret. And there's the danger for you."

"Court! Danger? You mean they'll be arrested—and I will be dragged in with them?"

"Reckon that is liable to happen," he replied, wanting to impress upon her once and for all the peril of the situation.

She gave vent to a shuddering sound. He could see her eyes were tight shut. Then she sank forward, her face on his knees, and clinging to him she broke into low sobs, every one of which was like a knife-thrust to Rock.

He let her have it out, and stroked her hair. She did not recover soon, though presently the sobs gave way to soft weeping. Then he held her closer, scarcely seeing her or the black pine-streaked gloom, or the stretching flares of yellow light along the horizon. He was seeing something blacker than the night, more sinister than the shadows.

At this brooding juncture of Rock's meditations he became aware that Thiry was stirring. She rose from her knees,

while still clinging to him, and she sank beside him on the bench, to lean against him, face uplifted.

"Can *anything* be done to save us?"

"It must be done, Thiry. Sure I don't know what. My mind's not workin' any better than yours."

"I dare not breathe a word of this. They would kill you."

"Never give Ash a hunch that I know. Don't tell your father anythin'. There's no great hurry. We've got time. I'll find some way."

"Oh, Trueman, you are my one hope. To think I've tried to drive you away! How little I know myself. But I do know this—if you stop this selling of stolen beef—if you prevent it before they're arrested—I'll—I'll love you with all my heart and soul."

"Darling, I will do it somehow."

"I'll go now," she said, rising and swaying unsteadily.

He lifted her in his arms and walked toward her cabin. At the door of the cabin he set her gently upon her feet. She still held him with one clinging hand.

"I'm glad now you came to Sunset Pass," she whispered. "But you've added to my fears. It's now you, too, who might fall under the Preston shadow."

"Be brave, Thiry. Don't give up. Never lose faith in me. Good night," he concluded, and loosing her hand he kissed it, and fled silently into the darkness.

Forty-eight hours later Rock rode into Wagontongue the old True Rock of earlier and wilder range days. Yet no day of his life had ever seen the passion, the will to invent and achieve, that one single moment now embodied.

When Rock dropped in to see Winter it was not with any definite purpose; but that night he and his old friend

locked themselves in a room at the hotel. There were range channels open to Winter to which Rock had no access. The Preston situation was graver—actual accusations had been made, it seemed, but by whom was not manifest. Winter talked while Rock listened. It did not take long to impart information that was endless in its possibilities.

"Sol, I'm in deep," said Rock, at the conclusion of Winter's confidence, and he opened his palms expressively. "Thiry loves me!"

"Shore," replied Winter, sagely wagging his head. "But you wouldn't take her an' leave the country?"

"Reckon I couldn't think of that yet."

"Do you know anythin' thet makes Preston's guilt shore?"

"Yes, but I promised Thiry not to tell it."

"But you can go to Preston an' tell *him* you know. Scare him to sense."

"Yes, I can. More—I know I can stop him."

"Good. That seems a solution. It's not too late. Go back pronto."

"Sol, Gage Preston can't call his soul his own. I reckon Ash led him into this, and nothin' on earth or in heaven can stop Ash Preston."

"Nothin'?" echoed Winter.

"Nothin' but lead!"

"Ahuh! Wal, I never yet seen thet kind of a hombre miss meetin' it. Leave him out. Now, Rock, I've an idee. If Dabb an' Lincoln know what I know, they will *tell* you. Thet obviates any broken promise on your part. An' they rule the Cattle Association. Hesbitt is only president. What Dabb an' Lincoln say is law. Now you go to them."

"But, Sol, good heavens! What for?" queried Rock impatiently.

"Son, you are so deep in love thet you ain't practical. If you can get Dabb

and Lincoln to sympathize with you an' Thiry, thet'll be sympathizin' with Preston. Ten years ago there was a case somethin' like this. Wal, his friends got him to make good what he'd stole, an' saved him from jail, if no worse. I've been raised with these ranchers. I know them. If you've got the nerve an' the wit you can keep Preston from ruin an' Thiry from a broken heart."

Rock leaped up, inspired, suddenly on fire with the vision Winter's sagacity had conjured up. He pushed aside table and chair, and hugged his startled friend. "Oldtimer, I've sure got the nerve and you've supplied the wit."

Rock presented himself at Dabb's office the next morning.

"Hello, Rock! You sure look rocky," replied Dabb, in answer to his greeting. "Hope you haven't been drunk."

"No. Only worried."

"Too bad. Have a chair and a cigar. What's the trouble, Rock? Things goin' bad out there?"

"They've gone from bad to worse. John, I told you I was in love with Thiry. Well, *that* wasn't so bad. But now she's in love with me."

"Man, you've only yourself to blame. You were advised not to go. I myself told you not to stay."

"I loved the girl," replied Rock simply.

"Humph!" said Dabb, chewing at his cigar. "You fell in love with Thiry before you went out there?"

"Of course. Otherwise do you suppose I'd have gone?"

"Probably not. Well, that puts another light on it. Rock, are you goin' to stock out there? And go under with Preston?"

"Reckon I must—if he goes under."

"Naturally you have your hopes. Rock, some of us cattlemen know you haven't

looked for anythin' shady about Preston."

"How do you know?"

"Well, that question came up the other night at our Association meeting. Hesbitt gave you a hard rub. Tom Lincoln an' I an' one or two others took exception to Hesbitt. We claimed you not only weren't in with Preston on anythin' crooked, but you hadn't trailed around lookin' for it. The reason, of course, was you were sweet on Thiry Preston."

"John, that was damned good of you," returned Rock warmly. "You an' Lincoln figured that if I had looked for shady work I'd have found it?"

"Sure. We knew that. No outfit could fool you."

"Well, what then?"

"Not so easy. But personally I believe you'd have come to me for advice an' help. Now, tell me what's worryin' you, Rock?"

"Hesbitt's outfits are after Preston," replied Rock, and he gave Dabb a detailed account of Dunne's maneuver at the Notch camp, and what had come of it.

"Rock, I'm darn glad you told me this. Reckon it didn't seem important to you—but it is important."

"How so?" asked Rock.

"Well, in the first place it vindicates Lincoln an' me in our stand for you. An' it will stump Hesbitt."

"Ahuh! Then this new rancher is dead set against Preston?"

"Is he? Well, I guess! An' he has his outfits r'arin'. Rock, the strange thing is, Hesbitt has been losin' a good deal of stock—most Half Moon brand—an' his men can't locate them. Hide nor hair! But other men have!"

"Dabb, what're you tellin' me?"

"Don't yell, cowboy. Walls have ears,"

admonished Dabb. "Rock, now listen. You once rode for Jess Slagle. You know him. Preston ruined Slagle. An' Slagle has hung around out there to get even. Reckon he's in a fair way to do it. For he has tracked the Prestons down. But he wants to get his money back, or some of it. Sure he knows if he threatens Preston with exposure he'll only get shot for his pains. So he came to me."

"Aw, this's awful!" groaned Rock. "Jess Slagle. An' he has tracked Preston down? What to, John?"

"Fresh Half Moon hides hidden close to where Preston last butchered. He can show these any time. I called Tom Lincoln in to talk it over. We advised Slagle to keep mum an' wait."

"What was the idea in that?"

"Well, we're all ranchers, you know," replied Dabb meditatively, as if the query had before presented itself to him. "In a little way, more or less, we've all appropriated cattle not our own. Reckon we hate to make a move. The stolen cattle were not ours, you see. It'll mean a fight. An' we've passed the buck to Hesbitt."

"No, John, by heaven! you've passed it to me," returned Rock, with passion.

"Now, Rock, you don't want to take this deal on your shoulders," protested Dabb.

"Would you? I put it up to you straight," demanded Rock eloquently. "Suppose you loved Thiry. Suppose she loved you, and you'd found out what a sweet girl she is—that if her father went to jail it'd break her heart—or kill her. Now what would you do?"

"Rock, I'm damned if I know," replied Dabb, red in the face, and he slammed his unsmoked cigar to the floor. "It's a cropper. An' I hate to be beaten by anythin' in the cattle line."

"Dabb, here's what I'll do, and I'm sure thankin' you for the hunch. I'll buy Slagle's silence. I've five thousand dollars in the bank. I'll stop Gage Preston's stealin' before it's too late."

"Suppose you come to my house for dinner tonight. I'll have Tom Lincoln. We'll talk it over."

It was dusk when Rock walked out to the mansion that was John Dabb's home, and was admitted to a cheerful library and the presence of Dabb and Lincoln.

"Howdy, Rock!" was Dabb's greeting. "Glad you came early. Tom, you remember True Rock, don't you?"

Lincoln was a little gray withered cattleman, bright of eye, lean of face, not apparently a day older than when Rock had last seen him. He looked like a Texas Ranger, and had been one in his day.

"I shore do," replied Lincoln, extending a lean hand. "Howdy, Rock!"

"Sit down, friends, an' smoke while I talk," said Dabb. "Now, Rock, I've talked your trouble over with Tom, an' here's his angle. I'm bound to say I think it a solution to a nasty problem. At that it hinges most on you. Go back to Preston an' tell him the truth. That he's found out by some cattlemen, an' he must quit his butcherin' stolen cattle before Hesbitt comes to him."

"Tell him he's to come before the Cattle Association. We'll keep the deal out of court an' Preston out of jail, provided he pays Slagle off, an' squares Hesbitt for the stock he has lost. Then Preston an' his four sons, especially this Ash Preston, who's the ringleader, no doubt, must leave the country."

"Wonderful fair and fine of you gentlemen," returned Rock instantly, his set face breaking. "Reckon I couldn't find words to thank you. I won't try."

"Wal, Rock, it's aboot this heah way," put in Lincoln, with his slow Southern accent. "We don't want the range slandered by such a raw case. Who'd ever think the Prestons would stoop to that? Mrs. Preston is a nice woman and the girls are ladies. Shore they cain't be in on the secret. We'd like to keep Preston out of jail for their sake."

"All right, Rock. What do you say?" queried Dabb. "Will you settle it?"

"Yes, with one reservation," replied Rock grimly.

"An' what's that?"

"I can manage Preston. But when Ash finds out, he'll fight. He can't be persuaded and he can't be frightened."

"Shore. An' your reservation is you'll have to kill him," interposed the imperturbable Texan, his bright eye on Rock.

Rock did not make any reply.

"Darn tough on the girl. My wife says she loves this particular brother," added Dabb regretfully.

"Reckon it's tougher on Rock, but *quien sabe?* You shore cain't ever tell about a woman," rejoined Lincoln.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Showdown

BEFORE sundown of another day Rock reined his sweating horse in front of Slagle's cabin, and dismounted to approach that individual, who had come to the door.

"Slagle, I want to talk Dutch to you," said Rock. "Dabb told me you'd come to him with proof of Preston's guilt."

"The devil he did!"

"Yes, and my business with you is to buy your silence."

Slagle showed further amazement and interest. He listened intensely to Rock's story. "Say, cowboy, air you makin'

this offer on your own hook?" he queried.

"Sure. I told only Sol Winter, who had my money banked."

"What on earth fer? Rock, excuse me, but it looks darn queer."

"Jess, I'm honest. I'm not in on the Preston steal, and you sure know that. I'm tryin' to stall the thing off. Now I figure you as pretty sore, and I don't blame you. What'll you take to keep mum?"

"Rock, this hyar don't set right on me. Lord knows I need money, but I ain't so low down I'd take a cowboy's savin's. What's your idee? You shore can't care thet much about Preston."

"Jess, you're wastin' my time. I love Thiry Preston and I'm goin' to save her dad because of that."

"I savvy. Shore call it decent of you. Makes me want to act square with you. An' the fact is, Rock, I couldn't prove anythin' on Preston now. The Half Moon hides have been moved from where I found them."

"Well, no matter. You did find them, and your word would convince ranchers, if not a court. My offer stands. What'll you take?"

"Rock, hev you got backin'?"

"No. I've my own money. Cash! Five thousand."

"Wal, I hate to take you up, Rock, an' I wouldn't if I didn't feel shore you'll get it back, or some, anyhow. Say I take half of what you got—twenty-five hundred. Preston will have to pay you. An', Rock, I'll pack an' rustle out of hyar pronto."

"That's fine, and better. It may be a long time till somebody else gets proof on Preston. And it's time I'm gamblin' on. Here's your money, Jess. I'm askin' two promises. Keep Preston's secret, and don't get drunk before you leave."

"Reckon thet's easy. Rock, I'm much obliged to you. I've got another chance in life."

"I hope you'll be successful," returned Rock, stepping over to his horse and mounting.

Though Rock put the white horse to a finish that concluded a wonderful day's travel, it was well after dark when they reached the Pass. At the barn Rock encountered one of the Mexican lads, and turned Egypt over to him. Peering into the kitchen door, he espied Mrs. Preston and Alice and Lucy at their evening chores.

"Howdy, folks! Is it too late for a bite and a cup of coffee? I've had nothin' since yesterday. Starved isn't the word!"

"Cowboy, it's never too late in this chuck-house," returned Mrs. Preston. "Come in and sit down."

Heavy boot thuds out on the porch attested to the approach of men. Rock certainly did not keep his back to the door.

"Who come in, Ma?" queried Preston, outside.

"A poor starved cowpuncher," replied his wife.

"Dad, it's only Mr. Rock," added Alice quickly.

Footfalls, sharp and quick, rang off the porch to thud on the ground. Then Preston's dragging steps approached. The doorway framed his burly form.

"Howdy, boss!" greeted Rock.

"Back so soon? Reckoned you'd stay out your leave," replied the rancher, with gloomy penetrating gaze on Rock.

"I rustled back," said Rock meaningly.

"Bad news?"

"Reckon all I got is good."

"Ahuh. Wal, come in, soon as you want to," concluded Preston.

Alice and her mother set before Rock a bounteous meal and while he gave ample evidence of appreciating it, they asked questions about the town. Rock imparted all the information he could muster.

Soon afterward Rock strode out to seek Preston. On the porch he halted, and gazing out at the spectral pines and up at the blinking stars, and across toward Thiry's bright window, he called on all the passion and wisdom that might come through hope and prayer.

"Rock, you didn't break any laigs gettin' hyar with thet good news," growled Preston as Rock entered.

"Reckon you won't be r'arin' for me to hurry, after I start," replied Rock, closing the door and facing the rancher. "Preston, not a whisper of what I say must be heard by anyone but you."

"Come close then, an' talk low."

Whereupon Rock drew a chair up to Preston's, and eyeing him squarely whispered, "Preston, the jig's up!"

"What you mean?" hoarsely rejoined the rancher.

"What's found out?"

"Your butcherin' stolen cattle. Slagle found Half Moon hides under that culvert above his place. He told John Dabb. Dabb told Tom Lincoln. Then me."

"My Gawd!" Preston covered his face with nerveless hands.

Rock's first thrill came with the rancher's reception of this news. It augured well. But he let the revelation sink deep. He waited.

At length Preston lifted his haggard countenance. "How can Slagle prove thet—on me?"

"He can't. The hides were there, and now they've been moved."

"Ahuh. Wal, then, I'll deny everythin' an' fight them."

"Gage, I can prove you guilty," whispered Rock.

"You can? How?"

"Ash's tracks. I trailed them. I measured them. I got his boot track here in the corral. I saw that same track leadin' down to the culvert and under it. I compared them. I ripped open one of those burlap sacks. The Half Moon brand!"

The big hands clenched, and opened wide. "Rock, you wouldn't ruin me?"

"No."

"Does anyone else have the proofs on me—like you?"

"No, not yet. But I'm not the only trailer on this range. Somebody will trail your sons, as I did Ash. *If you don't stop them!*"

"Does anybody else suspect—beside the four you named?"

"Hesbitt's outfits are scourin' the range. They suspect. But they don't know. Reckon sooner or later they'll hit on somethin'. Old sign. It might not convict, but it'd ruin you just the same. And any fresh sign—Preston, you'll all go to jail!"

"Rock, are you comin' in with me—an' Ash—an' Thiry?" asked Preston.

"I'm in with you and Thiry now. Not Ash. But clean and honest, Preston. I've laid my cards before Dabb and Lincoln. They know me. I couldn't be crooked now—not to save your life and Thiry's happiness."

"Ahuh! What's the deal?"

"Listen," whispered Rock, bursting with his message. "I've shut Slagle's mouth. I've bought his silence. He's leavin' the range."

"Lord Almighty! How'd you do it? What'd you give him?"

"Twenty-five hundred dollars."

Preston whistled low. "Of all the

fellars I ever seen, you—Rock, I'm goin' to square thet with you."

"Sure you are. You're goin' to square it *all*. Listen. Come to town with me. I've got it all fixed. Dabb will call a meetin' of the Cattle Association council. That means him, Lincoln, and Hesbitt. To keep this out of court you will agree to pay Hesbitt for his Half Moon stock. Dabb and Lincoln have promised me they'll handle Hesbitt. It will all be done in secret. Then you and your sons who were in this deal must leave the country. We all believe Ash roped you into this butcherin' stolen cattle."

"He shore did. He was killin' stolen steers long before I ever knew. Then it was too late to stop him. An' I drifted in myself. All so easy! Only a few head of stock at a time! Nobody could ever guess! An' now—Rock, I'd almost as lief croak as face thet council. They might let me off, but they'd tell. It'd leak out."

"Preston, you're not thinkin' clear. You don't see this right. Straight out you've fallen to worse than rustlin'. If you don't take this chance, for the sake of your womenfolk, you'll ruin them. And you'll be as bad as Ash. You're no fool. I'd say, if it weren't for your wife and daughters, you should *quit* this crooked work and fight the whole range. If you met up with a bullet, well and good. But you're not alone. You've got a wife to think of—daughters, innocent boys. Preston, I can't let you ruin Thiry!"

"Wal, I'll think your idee over good and hard, Rock. My not acceptin' it pronto doesn't mean I don't appreciate your wonderful offer an' all thet prompts you. I shore do. It may be the best way to save them. But the wife—Thiry, Allie, Lucy—they'd have to know, an'

I'd almost shore rather die in my boots than tell them."

"Man, we don't have to tell. No one but Thiry will ever know."

"All right. Thet's much in its favor. I'll think it over. Meanwhile, I'll stop Ash if I have to hawg-tie him. An' you better take the boys an' go off in the woods somewhere. They deserve a vacation. Take them huntin'. It's 'most turkey season. An' let me know where you go."

Well as Trueman Rock knew that country, it was his fortune to be taken by the Preston boys to high hunting-grounds which he had never visited or heard spoken of on the range.

It was up in the mountains back of the Pass, about a day's climb on horseback, 8000 feet above the low country. Up there early fall had set in and the foliage was one gorgeous array of color. The camp lay in a mountain meadow, at the edge of a magnificent grove of quaking aspens. Behind on a gentler slope stood scattered silver spruces and yellow pines, growing larger as they climbed, until on the ridge above they massed in the deep timber line, which like a green-black belt circled the mountain under the splintered peaks.

The days passed until Rock had no idea how long he had been absent from the Pass. Nearly a fortnight, he guessed. Then came Indian summer, that enchanting brief period of smoky, warm, still days, and floating amber and purple haze in the air.

Al Preston left to go down home for supplies. This threw Rock into a fever of uncertainty. What news would he fetch back? What message from Preston? Rock wandered in the open forest across from camp, wanting always to be in sight of the trail that came up from below. Mid-afternoon ought to see Al

ride in. That would allow ample time for the slow pack-horse. He sat on a pine log in the open forest above the oak grove.

Then a gray-laden pack-horse emerged from the green wall across the meadow. Next came a dark horse holding a slight rider that could not be Al Preston. Who could it be? Not the youngest Preston lad. Perhaps it was some boy Al had brought or sent. For Al was not in sight. Another pack-horse cleft the dark green gap where the trail emerged. And after it Al on his big bay. The foremost rider waved to the boys in camp. Rock watched with eyes starting. What was there strangely familiar about that rider? Yet he knew he had never seen him before. Suddenly he leaped up madly. Thiry!

He ran. He leaped the brook. He made the camp in bounds.

"Howdy, Trueman!" Her smile was strained and she scarcely met his eager gaze. He had never seen her in rider's garb. She wore a tan blouse, with blue scarf, fringed gauntlets, overalls, and high boots. She looked like a boy until she dismounted. Rock had a wild desire to snatch her in his arms.

"Boys, throw my pack and unroll my bed," she said. And while the boys obeyed with alacrity she led the stunned Rock away from camp, under the golden aspens, into the forest.

"Glad to see me?" she asked, looking ahead at the windfalls and the splashes of brilliant hues.

"Glad!" he echoed, as if words were inadequate.

She still held his hand, that she had taken openly before her brothers. Rock could not shake off his trance. Still, it did not seem the Thiry he knew. She halted beside a great fallen spruce with rugged seamed bark. "Lift me up," she

said. And when he had complied she held him with strange hands, and looked into his eyes as she had never before.

"Kiss me," this unknown Thiry said, not shyly, nor yet boldly, but somehow unnaturally for her. When Rock obeyed, she put her arms around him and her face against his neck. "Bad news, Trueman dear," she said, as if forced.

"Sure I could have guessed it. But it's welcome, since it fetched you."

"Ash made a killing of Half Moon steers and shipped the beef from Wagon-tongue," went on Thiry, talking by rote.

Rock's frame jerked with the hot gush of blood through his veins, but he did not voice his anger and dismay. Her monotone, the absence of any feeling, the abnormal something about her, fortified him to hear catastrophe which would dwarf what she had already told.

"Dad wants you to come in with us—share our fortunes, our troubles—our sins—help us fight these enemy outfits. If we—"

"We?" he interrupted, in bitter heat.

"Yes, we. Ash and Dad and I—and my three brothers—and you."

"If! And what do I get for spillin' blood for thieves? Ah, that is Preston's game. He wants me to kill—to spread terror among those Wyomin' outfits. And my reward will be—"

"Me," she said, without emotion.

"With Ash Preston's consent?" demanded Rock, angered to probe to the depths of this proposition.

"Dad claims when you become one of us—Ash will have to consent."

"Thiry Preston! You ask me to do this thing? You ask me to be a thief—a killer—to save your rotten brother, your weak and crooked father?"

"I—ask—you."

Almost with brutal force, Rock shook her, as if to awaken her out of a torpor. "No! No, you poor driven girl!" he cried. "I would die for *you*, but I'll never let you ruin your soul by such dishonor. They have blinded you—preyed on your love. Your brother is mad. Your father desperate. They would sacrifice you. Ash would agree to this, meanin' to shoot me in the back. No, Thiry!"

"You—will not?" she sobbed.

"Never. Not even to have you."

Suddenly then he had a wild weeping creature in his arms, whose cries were incoherent, whose beating hands and shaking body wrought havoc to the iron of his mood. "Oh, thank God—you won't!" she wept, lifting streaming eyes and working face. "I prayed you'd—refuse. I told Dad you'd never, never do it. I told Ash he lied—he'd never let you have me. But they made me—they drove me—all night they nagged me—until I gave in. Trueman darling, say you forgive. I was weak. I loved him so—and I'm almost broken. But you lift me from the depths. I love you more—a thousand times. Let come what will. I can face it now."

Hours later Rock kept vigil over a sleeping camp, where near him lay Thiry, in deep slumber, her fair sweet face, sad in repose, upturned to the watching stars. Beyond, her brothers were stretched in a row, likewise with dark faces still and calm in the star-light.

In the rose light of dawn, Rock and Thiry again wandered under the silver spruces, the golden aspens, the scarlet maples, back to that bit of primal forest-land.

"Don't go back to the Pass," Thiry was pleading.

"I must. I'll go alone."

"But I'm afraid. If you meet him—Oh—you will! Trueman, I couldn't hate you. Once I thought I might. Oh, don't go!" She wound her arms around his neck and clung to him with all her might.

"Take me away—far away across the mountains," she begged, her lips parting from his to implore mercy, and then seeking them again. "It's the only way. I am yours, body and soul. I ask nothing more of life but that you spare him—and take me. The boys will let us have a pack. We can cross the mountains. It is not yet winter. Then somewhere we two will live for each other. I will forget him and all this horror. And you—will never—kill another man."

"Thiry girl, hush; you are breakin' me," he cried, spent with the might of agonized will that denied her kisses, her clinging arms. "That would be the worst for us both. It would brand me with their guilt and drag you down. No. I shall go alone—make one last stand to save your father."

Rock rode the zigzag descending trail down to the Pass in four hours—another splendid performance of the sure-footed, tireless horse.

There did not appear to be any untoward condition at the ranch that affected the womenfolk. Preston had ridden off early that morning to a general roundup out on the range, at a place called Clay Hill. Ash Preston and his three brothers were off somewhere, probably also at the roundup, on their return from Wagontongue.

"Reckon I'll ride over to Clay Hill," muttered Rock.

Clay Hill was a famous old roundup ground. The bare knob of clay rising over a grassy level had given it a name. There were several cabins near the

springs that gushed from the base of the hill.

Rock's keen eye snapped at the old-time scene. Dust and color and action! Herds of cattle, fields of horses! Not until he rounded the southern corner of Clay Hill, where the trail ran, and came abruptly upon the first cabin, horses, wagons, men, did he grasp that something was amiss. What could check a general roundup in the middle of the afternoon? No cowboys on guard! No cutting or branding! No movement, except a gradual straggling of the herds! The men he saw were in groups, and their postures were not expressive of the lazy, lounging, careless leisure attendant upon meal hours or cessation of work.

Rock had permitted himself no anticipations. But now he divined the hour he had long dreaded; and he spurred his horse and rode down upon the men, scattering dust and gravel all over them.

He was off, throwing bridle, gloves, and in two swift jerks he got out of his chaps. "What's up?" he demanded of the six or eight cowmen who backed away. In the first sweeping glance he did not recognize one of them.

"Jimmy Dunne shot," replied an older man warily, his narrow slits of eyes shifting all over Rock.

"Who did it?"

"Ash Preston."

"Where is Dunne?"

"Layin' in the cabin thar."

Rock brushed the men aside. "Get out of my way," he ordered sharply, and forcing entrance to the cabin, he surveyed the interior. A line of dusty, sweaty cowboys fell back, to disclose a man lying on the floor, with another kneeling in attendance. Rock saw a face of deathly pallor, clammy and

leaden, and eyes black with pain. He stepped in and knelt, to take up Dunne's inert wrist and feel for his pulse.

At that the other man looked up quickly. It was Clink Peeples. "Howdy, Rock! I don't know, but I'm afeared Jim is—still I'm no good hand at judgin' bullet holes."

"Let me see."

The wound was situated high up on the left side, and it was bleeding freely, though not dangerously. Rock, calculating grimly, saw that Preston had missed the heart by several inches. The bullet had no doubt nicked the lung. But there was no sign of internal hemorrhage.

"Did the bullet come out?"

"It went clean through, clean as a whistle."

"Good!" exclaimed Rock, with satisfaction. "Dunne, can you hear me?"

"Why, sure," replied Dunne, faintly. A bloody froth showed on his lips. "Rock, reckon Preston—beat you—to this job."

"Reckon I'd never have done it. Listen, Dunne. This is a bad gunshot, but not necessarily fatal. If you do what you're told you'll live."

"You—think so, Rock? I've got—a wife—an' kid."

"I know it," returned Rock forcefully. "Understand? I know."

"Rock, that's shore—good news," panted Peeples, wiping his face. "I was plumb scared. Tell us what to do."

"Make a bed for him here," replied Rock, rising. "But don't move him till he's bandaged tight. Make him lie quiet. Heat water boilin' hot. Put salt in it. Wash your hands clean. Get clean bandages. A clean shirt if there's nothin' else. Fold a pad and wet it. Bind it tight. Then send to town for a doctor."

"That's tellin' us" returned Peeples gratefully.

"Peeples, was it an even break?" inquired Rock coolly.

"Wal, I'm bound to admit it was. So we've nothin' on Preston that way."

"What was it about?"

Dunne spoke up for himself in stronger voice: "Rock, I had the—proofs on him—much as I didn't—have on you."

"Ahuh! Don't talk any more, Dunne," replied Rock, and turned to Peeples. "Did he accuse Ash?"

"He shore did. Braced him soon as he got here with his outfit."

"Where are the Prestons?" asked Rock, stalking out.

"Over at the third cabin," replied someone. "Ash is stalkin' to an' fro over thar, like a hyena behind bars."

Rock elbowed his way out of the crowd. Soon his glance fell upon those he sought. Ash Preston stalked to and fro, away from the cabin, and when he faced back toward the watching men he appeared to do it sidewise. Two of his tall brothers sat together, backs to the cabin wall. A third, probably Range Preston, stood in the doorway, smoking a cigarette. Apart from them sat Gage Preston, his burly form sagging, his bare head bowed. Rock's impression was that Gage awaited only the sheriff.

Long ago Rock's mind had been made up and set. He grasped at inevitability—strode forth to meet it, aware of the low excited murmur that ran through the crowd behind him.

Ash, espying Rock, halted in his tracks. The two brothers rose in single action, as if actuated by the same spring. Range Preston stepped outside to join his brothers. Gage Preston did not see, nor look up, until Rock hailed them. Then, with spasmodic start, he staggered erect.

Ash Preston, seeing that Rock had sheered a little off a direct line, to approach his father, hurled an imprecation, and fell to his swift, striding, sidelong stalk.

"Rock, I'm done," rasped Preston when Rock got to him. "So double-crossin' you like I did means nothin' to me."

"Preston, have you been in any of these last butcherin' deals?" queried Rock.

"No. An' so help me heaven, I couldn't stop Ash."

"Why did you send Thiry—persuadin' me to come in with you?"

"That was why. I wasn't beat then. I figgered I could fight it out an' I wanted you. So I drove Thiry to it. But now! You had it figgered, Rock. I'm sorry—sorry most fer Thiry, an' Ma, an' the girls. If I had it to do over again, I'd—"

"Do it now," interrupted Rock, ringingly. "Come with me to Wagontongue. The situation is no worse—for you. Come, Preston, be quick. There'll be hell poppin' here in a minute. Will you give up—go with me?"

"Rock, by heaven! I will—if you—"

"Yell that to Ash!" hissed Rock.

Preston, with face purpling, shouted to his son, "Hey, Ash!"

"What you want?" came the snarling answer.

"I'm goin' to town with Rock."

"What fer?" yelled Ash, as if stung.

"Wal, just off, I'm gettin' a marriage license for Thiry! Haw! Haw! Haw!"

"I say what fer?" yelled Ash.

"To pay your thievin' debts, you—!"

"Preston, get to one side. Quick!" warned Rock risking one long stride forward, when he froze in his tracks, his right side toward Ash, his quivering hand low.

Ash Preston spat one curse at his father—then saw him no more. Again he began that strange sidelong stalk, only now he sheered a little, out toward Rock. He approached no closer than 30 paces. Then he did not or could not keep still. "Howdy, spy!" he called.

"Glad to meet you, beef rustler," returned Rock.

"Am givin' you my card pronto," called Ash, louder, more derisively.

"Gave you mine at the dance. But I got six left! *Caramba!*"

That stopped the restless crouching steps, but not the singular activity of body. Ash's muscles seemed to ripple. Rock could catch gleams of blue fire under the wide black brim of Ash's hat. "*Señor del Toro!*"

"Yes. And here's Thiry's mask—where she put it herself," flashed Rock, striking his breast. "See if you can hit it!"

At the last he had the wit to throw Ash off a cool and deadly balance—so precious to men who live by the gun. When Ash jerked to his fatal move Rock was the quicker. His shot cracked a fraction of a second before his adversary's. Both took effect. It was as if Ash had been hit in the head by a club. Almost he turned a somersault.

Rock felt a shock, but no pain. He did not know where he was hit until his right leg gave way under him, letting him down. He fell, but caught himself with his left hand, and went no farther than his knees.

Ash bounded up as he had gone down, with convulsive tremendous power, the left side of his head shot away. Blood poured down. As he swept up his gun Rock shot him through the middle. The bullet struck up dust beyond and whined away. But Ash, sustaining the shock, fired again, and

knocked Rock flat. The bullet struck high on his left shoulder. He heard two more heavy booms of Ash's gun, felt the sting of gravel on his face. Half rising, braced on his left hand, Rock fired again. He heard the bullet strike. Ash's fifth shot spanged off Rock's extended gun, knocked it flying, beyond reach.

Preston was sagging. Bloody, mortally stricken, he had no will except to kill. He got his gun up, but could not align it, and his last bullet struck far beyond Rock, to whine away. He tried to fling the empty gun. It flipped at random. He swayed, all instinctive action ceasing, and with his ruthless eyes on his fallen foe, changing, glazing over, setting blank, he fell.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Back to Sunset Pass

WHEN Rock came to his senses again he was lying on the floor of the cabin where seemingly only a few moments before he had given advice as to the proper care of the wounded Dunne.

He gazed around up at the grave faces of cowboys and cattlemen, at Gage Preston, who, grim and white, was binding his leg, at Peeples, still working over the prostrate Dunne.

"Preston, how is it—with Rock?" asked Dunne huskily.

"Wal, the top bullet glanced off the bone," replied the rancher. "Ugly hole, but nothin' fer this fellar. The leg shot, though, is bleedin' bad."

Rock became conscious of awakening pain, of a burning in his breast and a dull spreading fire in his right leg.

Presently Preston rose from his task, wiping his bloody hands, and the voices of watchers ceased. "Somebody get

Rock to town pronto," he said gruffly. "Ain't safe to let him wait fer the doctor."

"Lon Bailey has his four-seat buckboard," replied a cowboy. "We can take out the hind seat, an' fix a place for Rock to lay."

"Rustle now," replied Preston, and then bent his gloomy gaze down. "Rock, if the artery ain't cut you've nothin' bad. No bones broke."

"Gage, I'm—sorry," whispered Rock faintly. "No—other way."

"Hal! You needn't be. Shore, I'm not," rejoined the rancher.

"Will you—come to town?"

"Tomorrow. Me an' the boys will see Dabb. Mebbe it ain't too late."

"It—never—is, Preston."

"I'm thankin' you. Good-by an' good luck," he returned, and stamped out.

Rock closed his eyes.

Rock was lying in the pleasant sitting-room of the Winters' home where a couch had been improvised for him. He had awakened to less torture, but he could move only his one arm and head. A fire crackled cheerfully in the small grate. Outside the window waved the branches of a pine tree and a soft sough of wind came strangely, like an accompaniment of something sad in the past.

Another day Rock awoke to rest, if not ease, and slowly the stream of consciousness resumed its flow.

The little doctor was cheerful that day. "You're like an Indian," he said, rubbing his hands in satisfaction. "Another week will see you up. Then pretty soon you can fork a hoss."

"How is your other patient?" asked Rock.

"Dunne is out of danger, I'm glad to say. But he will be a good while in bed."

Sol Winter came bustling in with an armful of firewood. "Mornin', son! You shore look fitter to me. How about him, Doc? Can we throw off the restrictions on grub an' talk?"

"I reckon," replied the physician, taking up his hat and satchel. "Now Rock, brighten up. You've been so thick and gloomy. Good day."

"Wal, son, I almost feel young again this mornin'," said Sol cheerfully, as he kindled the fire. "Shore is some fine mornin'. First frost."

Then Mrs. Winter entered with breakfast for Rock. She was a slim, plain, busy little body, with gray hair, kindly eyes, and a motherly manner.

"Trueman, there's news," said Winter after his wife left the room. "Might as well get it over, huh?"

"I reckon so," rejoined Rock slowly.

"Gage Preston paid me the money and left."

"Left?" echoed Rock.

"Yep, he left for Colorado," replied Winter, evidently gratified over the news he had to impart. "Go on with your breakfast, son. I'll talk. I've been wantin' to for days. Rock, it all turned out better'n we dared hope. They tell me Hesbitt was stubborn as a mule, but Dabb an' Lincoln together flattened him out soft. I got it all from Amy, who has been most darn keen to help. Wal, with the steer market jumpin' to seventy-five, even Hesbitt couldn't stay sore long. They fixed it up out of court. Dabb an' Lincoln made it easy for Preston. They bought him out, ranch, stock, an' all. Cost Preston somethin' big to square up, but at thet he went away heeled."

"Did he go—alone?" asked Rock.

"No. His three sons were with him. The rest of the Prestons are in town,

but I haven't seen them. Funny Thiry doesn't run in to see me. I met Sam Whipple's wife. She saw Thiry an' Alice, who are stayin' at Farrell's. She said she couldn't see much sign of Thiry's takin' Ash's death very hard. Thet shore stumped me. But Thiry is game."

He went out, leaving Rock prey to rediscovered emotions. He had sacrificed his love to save Thiry's father, and therefore her, from ignominy. The thing could not have been helped. It had from the very first, that day in the corral here at Wagontongue, been fixed, and as fateful as the beautiful passion Thiry had roused in him. He had no regret. He would not have changed it, at cost to her.

"Son, lady to see you," announced Winter, not long after he had made Rock presentable.

"Who?" asked Rock with a start.

"No one but Amy."

"Tell her I'm sleepin' or—or somethin'," implored Rock.

"Like hob he will," replied a gay voice from behind the door. And Amy entered, pretty and stylish, just a little fearful and pale, despite her nerve.

"Well, how do, Amy?" said Rock, and then he laughed. Amy's presence was always difficult to deny gladly.

"Trueman, are you all right?" she asked timidly. "Oh, Trueman, I've been in a horrible state ever since I came home."

"Well! I'm sorry, Amy. How so?"

"I hate to tell you, but I've got to," she replied. "For it was my last, miserable, horrible trick! Trueman, the day I got back I met Ash Preston on the street. I told him you—you were Señor del Toro. He laughed in my face—called me a jealous liar. You cannot imagine what I felt when they fetched you here—all shot up. Trueman, I am a chastened

woman. It made me merciless to myself. It opened my eyes. I told my husband, and since then we've grown closer than we ever were."

"Then, Amy, I forgive you."

Quick as a bird she pecked at his cheek, to lift a flushing, radiant face. "There! The first sisterly one I ever gave you. Trueman, I am the bearer of good news. You are a big man now. Yes, sir, in spite of—or perhaps because of—that awful gun of yours. But your honesty has gone farther with John and Tom Lincoln. I have the pleasure of telling you that you've been chosen to run the Sunset Pass Ranch for them. On shares."

"Never, Amy, never!" cried Rock, shivering. "I shall leave Wagontongue again—soon as I can walk."

"Not if *we* all know it," she retorted as she rose, with inscrutable eyes on him. "You've got more friends than you think. Now I'll go. But I'll come again soon. Good-by."

Amy had hardly gone when a squeak of the door and a deep expulsion of breath from someone entering aroused Rock. He gave such a start that his stiff injured leg reminded him of his condition. Thiry had entered. She was bareheaded, and her soft hat dropped from nerveless hands.

"Thiry!—how good—of you!"

Haltingly she approached, as if the impelling force that drew her was only slightly stronger than something which held her back. "Trueman, are you—all right?" she asked, apparently awed at the helpless length of him there on the bed. She sat down beside him, and her eyes, black with thought and pain, followed her reaching hand, to rest on the coverlet over his knee.

"Reckon I'm 'most all right—now," he replied, sensitive to her touch.

"Mr. Winter told me everything," she went on, "but *seeing* you is so strange. Can you move?"

"Sure. All but my left leg."

"Was that broken?"

"No, I'm glad to tell you."

"Then you can ride again?"

"Some day."

Then she looked him squarely in the face, which she had failed to do before.

"I had to fight myself to come," she said. "There was a cold, dead, horrible something inside me—but it's leaving! Trueman, you're so white and thin. So helpless lying there! I—I want to nurse you. I should have come. Have you suffered?"

"A little—I reckon," he replied unsteadily. "But it's—gone now."

"Has Amy Dabb been here?" she asked jealously.

"Yes. Today. She was very nice."

"Nice! Because she wheedled John Dabb to offer you the running of Sunset Pass Ranch?"

"Oh no—I mean, just kind," returned Rock uncertainly.

"Trueman, you will accept that offer?" she queried earnestly. "I don't care what Amy says. I know it was my father's advice to Dabb."

"Me ever go to—Sunset Pass—again? Never in this world."

"Trueman, you would not leave this country?" she asked in alarm.

"Soon as I can walk."

"But I do not want to leave Sunset Pass," she returned with spirit.

"I'm glad you don't. Reckon that's a surprise, Thiry. It's very beautiful—out there. Perhaps, somehow, it can be arranged for you. Someone, of course, will take the place. Is your mother leavin' soon?"

"She is terribly angry with Dad," replied Thiry seriously. "But I think

some day she'll get over it—when Dad makes a new home—and go back to him."

She edged a little closer, grave and sweet, and suddenly moved up to lay her cheek over his heart, with a long low sigh. "Trueman, did you think I'd—hate you for killing Ash?" she whispered.

He could not speak.

"I thought I would. And it was a sickening, terrible blow! But before that same night was over I knew I couldn't hate you. And I believe, even if I hadn't learned what changed it all, I would have forgiven you—some day."

"What changed all?" burst out Rock, in insupportable suspense.

"Ash was not my brother," she said, in smothered voice, and her hand sought his cheek.

Rising, Thiry slipped to the floor on her knees, and leaned upon her elbows, clasping his hands, regarding him with remorseful tenderness. "My brother Range beat the others home that night, with the news of the fight. I knew we were ruined—that Ash in some way had brought it about. Perhaps my love for him turned then. But I want you to know that even then believing Ash my brother I'd have forgiven you. I know it. After the agony was spent I was learning how deathlessly I loved you. Sometime in the night, late, Dad came to me. Never had I seen him gentle, sad, defeated, yet something better for that. . . . He told me not to take it too hard—not to visit the sins of others upon your head. You had been driven to kill Ash. Someone *had* to do it, for the good of all, and no one but you *could*. He told me how he had inflamed Ash.

"Then came the story, torn from his most secret heart. Ash was not his son,

but the illegitimate son of a girl he had loved long ago, who, abandoned and dying, gave him her child. That child was Ash. And Dad said he was what his father had been. I was not yet born. But when I came, Ash was my playmate. I remember when we were children. He was always vicious to everyone except me. And so I grew up loving him, perhaps for that. Next day I went to mother, and she corroborated Dad's story.

"I was to learn how you had bought Slagle's silence—how you persuaded Dabb and Lincoln to force Hesbitt to settle out of court—oh, how from the very beginning you had meant good by all of us! Yet I could not drag myself to you. It took time. I had such dreadful fear of seeing you lying in danger of death, bloody, pale, with awful eyes that would have accused me. But now I'm here—on my knees."

"Please get up," said Rock, lifting her to a seat beside him.

"Now will you accept Dabb's offer and take me back to Sunset Pass?" she asked, bending to him.

"Yes, Thiry, if you will have it so," he replied. "If you love me that well."

She gave him passionate proof of that. "Dear, I understand better. Dad told me you were one of the marked men of the ranges. Our West is in the making. Such men as Ash—and those others you—"

Sol Winter came in upon them. "Wal, I knocked twice, an' then I says I'd better go in." He beamed down upon them. "Son an' lass, I'm glad to see you holdin' each other thet way—as if now you'd never let go. For I've grown old on the frontier, an' I've seen but little of the love you have for each other. I see in you, an' Allie, an' some more of our young friends, a leanin' more to finer, better things."

THE END

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They called him "Professor Buckshot"
—this mild-mannered, scholarly
immigrant who mixed

BULLET LEAD and BOOK LEARNIN'

by Harold Preece



NATURE had endowed him with no appearance of courage. His shoulders were bent in the traditional stoop of the scholar. Gray silvered his temples, and his mild face was beginning to be seamed with the first deepening furrows of middle age. His bony, tapering fingers had fondled many a heavy tome of science or philosophy. They had never felt the heft of a gun until he hit Texas.

Joseph Ludwig Christian von Holtzmann, he was called when he arrived with a boatload of German immigrants at old Indianola on a chill morning in 1844. It was a name well-known in certain celebrated universities where he had functioned as an indexer of rare books till the Prussian king's secret police had hounded him out for his sympathies with the illegal democratic movement of his homeland.



A port official of the Lone Star Republic pared down the fancy handle by listing him on the entry rolls as Joe Holman, which rolled smoother off the tongues of Texans. With that incident, he might have been forgotten. Or remembered briefly for his odd baggage—three shirts and three hundred books. But fate sometimes charts new trails for a man sinking fresh roots in strange country. Holman, the bookworm, had looked forward to the calm life of a teacher in this raw young nation needing schools as it needed settlers. Yet he'd been in his adopted land just one week when he revealed that frequent, but always surprising courage of shy people.

On its way to the pioneer German settlement of New Braunfels, the immigrant party was attacked by a heavily

armed Comanche war band. Three times, the charging phalanx of death was hurled back by blistering rifle barrages of the colonists. As the Indians were riding off, guns silent in defeat, a sudden Texas norther whipped across the grassy prairie.

The Comanches wheeled their ponies and drew bows that showered blazing arrows toward the bunched wagons. Licking tongues of flame began crumbling the canvas of half a dozen vehicles. Gusts of wind fanned fire faster than pails of water from the supply barrels could quench it.

After the fifth bombardment of winged torches, the wind shifted its course. Holman noticed that it was now blowing in the direction of the Indians. Quickly he ripped a burning cloth from a wagon and darted out on the prairie.

The hair on his hands singed from the scorching heat of the canvas. Bullets and arrows whizzed around him as the Comanches concentrated their shots on such an obvious target. Ducking low, Holman flung the burning cloth into the brittle, dry grass.

The grass hissed and crackled, then turned to billowing columns of flame that the goading wind sped toward the amazed Comanches. The warriors wheeled their ponies and fled. The Texan wagonmaster eased down his gun, then cocked an admiring eye on the man who had turned calamity into triumph.

"I've heard of fightin' devils with fire," he drawled, "but damned if it didn't take a greenhorn who never struck a spark from a flint to show me how it's done."

Once he'd reached New Braunfels, Holman decided to forego schoolteaching since his frail body needed the tonic of outdoor work. So he filed on homestead

land in that community of exiled German scholars who plowed the fields by day and read Goethe or Schiller by night. Six months after his arrival, he learned that the Texas Rangers were appealing for citizen volunteers to help stamp out the bandit gangs infesting that western frontier of Texas.

These outlaws reminded Holman of the thugs mobilized by German noblemen to seize the crops and burn the homes of defenseless peasants. He boarded a stage to Austin, the capital, and offered his services to Ranger commander-in-chief Jack Hays.

Major Hays took one look at the sedate academic face and wanted to be rid of him. "Go home, Professor," he said. "This is a job for men used to spurs and triggers. You're a man of education—"

"Correct, Captain," Holman interrupted in his precise university English. "I am educated—in books."

"But, sir, not knowing how to ride and shoot is a form of illiteracy in Texas."

Horsemanship and marksmanship both came hard after Holman had gone out with a detail hunting horse thieves in the rugged Blanco Mountains. When he lifted a timid foot in a stirrup, he dangled like an untrained acrobat on a trapeze till an amused corporal boosted him into the saddle. His carbine kicked and backfired to blister his face with gunpowder during target matches. The Texans kept jibing the bungling "Professor," finally presenting him with a stick horse "to practice bronc busting" and a wooden pistol "to drill bad hombres."

For two weeks, Holman good-humoredly endured their joshing while he kept wrestling with the mysteries of bit and rifle. Then there came a day when

he swung into the stirrup as effortlessly as if he were opening a book. Now he sat his saddle in that relaxed slouch of Texans instead of bobbing up and down like a jumpingjack every time his bronc broke into a fast trot. Testing his aim, he leveled his carbine on a jackrabbit. The gun yielded to his mastery like the horse, and the dead rabbit was proof.

A week later, the detail came suddenly on two of the horse thieves. Both sides fired simultaneously. A Ranger's gun hand was ruined forever when a bullet clipped off his index finger. The outlaw pair then separated and raced off in different directions.

One made it to a dense cedar brake and was lost to sight. The Rangers gave chase to his partner, hightailing across an open plain toward a tangled jungle of brush a quarter of a mile beyond.

Halfway to the brush, the desperado's horse stumbled and collapsed with a broken leg. The outlaw jumped from his useless mount and sprinted on foot toward the thicket.

Joe Holman raised his rifle and fired. The man ahead screamed as the shell splintered his leg bone. He fell to the ground, writhing and moaning. The Professor spurred ahead of his companions to bring his bronc abreast of the wounded man.

"Don't shoot, for God's sake," the outlaw blubbered as his captor jumped down and bent over him. "I'm dying already."

"I won't shoot," Holman answered in that patient, slow way of his. "And you won't die. But I think you'll talk. *Ja.*"

The Rangers came riding up to place the prisoner under arrest. As he lay whining for mercy, the wounded desperado named all his fellow thieves and

gave directions to reach their hide-out.

After signing a written confession, the captive was hauled in a wagon borrowed from a rancher to the nearest jail. A Ranger corporal assigned Holman as one of the guard to take him in. But the sergeant, leading the detail, spoke up to countermand the order.

"No," he said firmly. "Somebody else can go. The Professor drew the first blood on this scout. He's entitled to be in on the showdown."

Shortly after dusk, the pursuers reined up their horses in a patch of woods broken by a little clearing. A dim strip of light flickered through the doorsill of a cedarboard shack in the middle of the open space. From inside the house came the husky murmur of voices and the metallic clink of coins.

"Tied up in a poker game, most likely," the sergeant said in a low tone. "A good time to smash in and surprise 'em."

Dismounting and crouching low, the men crept noiselessly toward the door. Across the clearing they stalked till they were within twenty feet of the entrance. Then a Ranger's big boot came into contact with a tin pie plate that had been thrown into the yard.

A man called from the shack:

"Who's there?"

"Texas Rangers," the sergeant yelled back. "Surrender!"

A hail of lead, belching through knot-holes in the wall, was the answer. The Rangers fell flat on the ground. Holman was forced to shift his position toward the rear of the house. Then he noticed that the house had a cellarlike extension with a trap door at the end.

Holding his carbine in one hand, inching his way along on the other, he

edged out of gun range to reach the trap door. It was locked!

He raised his gun butt to smash it in. The continuing blast of gunfire drowned the sound of his battering. After ten minutes, the trap door caved in.

Holman plunged through, to descend a short flight of steps into the cellar. At the other end of the dank hole, a stairway led to the main room on the ground floor.

Carbine cocked and drawn, Holman crept up the stairs and halted on the room's threshold. In the darkness, he made out the shadowy forms of a dozen men busily firing through a dozen holes. Between him and them stood a rough table whose surface was littered with cards and heaps of silver dollars gleaming in the darkness.

"Rifles down, hands up, gentlemen," he shouted. "The battle it is—" he fumbled an instant for the English word—"it is over."

The startled bandits wheeled around. Man and rifle were hazy shapes in the dark room. But man and rifle were both obviously ready for business.

Their guns dropped. Their hands went up. All but one pair of guns—and one pair of hands.

A man's leg lunged out toward the table. The table turned over. Cards and coins went flying. The outlaw aimed his rifle at Holman. A trigger clicked on a misfire; Holman's gun barked. Clutching at his heart, the outlaw spun around like a top and slumped to the floor.

Holman turned quickly to see more of the gang reaching for their guns. "Let them alone," he called warningly. "I don't like to kill."

The Rangers came smashing through the front door. The sergeant lit a lamp and stared at the man lying dead on the floor.

"Baldy Jenson," he grunted. "Good work, Professor. You plugged the king-pin of 'em all."

With his share of the reward money for the gang's capture, Holman bought a comfortable stone house on the banks of the serene little Comal River flowing through New Braunfels. He filled the house with bookcases that he hewed from stout Texas oak. On the wall, he hung pictures of the two Americans he respected most—Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, and Thomas Paine, who had penned the Rights of Man.

As New Braunfels kept growing through fresh migrations from the old country, he helped the little community earn the distinction of being Texas's very first center of culture. His love of discussion made him take a leading part in the lyceum or open forum which many resented because speakers so constantly attacked slavery. Later he contributed his shaky alto to the local singing society, and scraped a violin in the municipal symphony orchestra that played Beethoven under the shady trees of the town plaza.

Holman bought more books—and the first Colt repeating revolver ever seen in New Braunfels. He demonstrated the superiority of the new weapon when a wandering badman was terrorizing the settlement with one of the old single-action models. The Professor cornered the gunman in the Plaza. Three shots from his repeater clipped off three chunks of hide before the unwelcome visitor could get his pistol into action.

Settlers everywhere gabbed about Joe Holman—not for his book lore but for his trigger knack. Glory was a mantle which irked him as much as the name that Texans pinned on him.

Professor Buckshot. The nickname soured him on firearms so that he laid away his arsenal and went back to his library. When he wasn't bent over a book, he was collecting and classifying specimens of the native animals around him.

Six different species of squirrels that he identified in the Comal Valley meant more to him than all the sixty-odd techniques of gunfighting. Then he heard that the younger German settlements, west of New Braunfels, were in danger of being wiped out by gangs of mounted cutthroats.

The year was 1847 when he rode forth again. Texas was now a state of the United States, and its admission had touched off the Mexican War, which found him above military age. The regular Ranger force had been incorporated into the Federal cavalry now swashbuckling across Mexico. But Governor George T. Wood commissioned "Professor Buckshot" as a special Ranger without pay.

Holman found the neat little immigrant villages on the Guadalupe River demoralized and terror-stricken. Settlers had been stripped of their herds; many had been waylaid and robbed on the unguarded roads. Schoolhouses had been burned by badmen whose recreation was riding into towns and "rousting out the Dutch." Thieves and brigands, denned up in the Balcones Mountains, snapped their fingers at awkward German marshals.

Joe Holman, academician and crack shot, rallied his long-suffering countrymen to strike back. From men who had learned to shoot as conscripts in the Prussian army he recruited a corps, celebrated in the six-shooter annals of Texas as the German Rangers. Then he led them on their first assignment

to clear the public roads of highway-men.

Holman gave orders that known bandits were to be shot on sight. Ten of them went down before the blasts of his command during ten days of whirlwind attack, and as many more during a week of brisk mop-ups which followed. A scant half dozen, lucky to get off with wounds, were put in repair by German doctors before being shipped off to sweat at hard labor in the Texas penitentiary.

For six months, the scholarly lawman led his outfit in operations that never ceased, to the tune of shooting that seldom stopped. His force restored stage traffic between the Guadalupe settlements and San Antonio by annihilating several holdup gangs that had been stopping the coaches. Afterward Holman posted a Ranger to "ride shotgun" on every one of the creaking box wagons.

Once while riding alone, Holman ran smack into a band looting a caravan of freight wagons bound across the hills from Houston. Spurring toward the gang, he opened fire with his .45. Two men, covering the drivers with rifles, toppled from their saddles. The rest wheeled around on their horses to begin blasting at the solitary Ranger, but the diversion gave the freighters a chance to grab guns from their wagons.

They opened up on the bandits. Holman's Colt kept singing its accompaniment to the volleys which smashed at the highwaymen. The leader of the gang lashed his bronc through the melee to rein up, gun in hand, within a few feet of the Ranger.

He drew a quick bead on the lawman and fired. The shot missed its mark just as a freighter's bullet severed the bridle of the leader's pony. The outlaw

went hurtling over his mount's head to land on the road. For a moment he lay groaning before raising himself painfully to aim the pistol still clutched tightly in his hand.

A shot from a freighter's carbine smashed through his skull.

The fight finished with all twelve of the bandits stretched on the ground. Half were ready for the undertaker, half for the doctor and sheriff.

A thick cloud of smoke enveloped the spot where Holman had reined up to give battle. The freighters strained their eyes to see if he was still alive. The gunpowder fog began trailing away. The figure of Professor Buckshot emerged.

His face was bleeding from bullet scratches; his buckskin shirt was ripped to tatters. But he was sitting firmly in his saddle. The men rushed toward him.

"Are you hurt bad, Professor?" somebody asked anxiously.

Joe Holman glanced down at the prostrate bandits. "No," he answered mildly. "But I think these gentlemen are."

After that showdown, there was no more brigandage on the mountain roads; the road agents were all either beneath dirt or behind bars. With the highways safe, Holman marshaled his German Rangers against the hordes of cattle and horse thieves roving the Balcones.

They routed the wide-loopers from their holes and recovered hundreds of stolen animals from their hidden corrals. They confiscated the running irons of the gangs and presented them as clinching evidence in frontier courts. Finally only one major gang was left on the great open ranges of the Guadalupe.

Holman trailed the band to its rendezvous—an old ranch house near Enchanted Rock. The Rangers attacked the outlaw citadel at dawn, and routed the gang from the house into the yard. During a hectic close-in fight, a desperate brand burner picked up an ax from a woodpile and hurled it at the Professor.

Holman grabbed the handle in mid-air and flung the ax back at the outlaw. The blade landed in his skull and stuck there. Unnerved, the survivors threw up their hands.

When the gang was lodged in jail at Fredericksburg, the sheriff identified each one as a fugitive with a price on his head. Ten thousand dollars, the combined reward totaled.

Then a deputy from another community recognized them as the sorry characters who had burned the schoolhouse in his settlement. Holman stared hard at the bunch sulking behind the bars.

"Brand burners," he muttered. His face was grim. "Schoolhouse burners." His expression became one of outrage. "Books turned to ashes by dunces! *Gott!*"

He glared the firebugs out of countenance.

"I think your heads buy us a new schoolhouse."

Not long after, the Rangers received a state warrant for ten thousand dollars to cover the reward. Holman folded the draft in his wallet, and rode toward the little town that had lost its school. There he turned up the village mayor. He handed him the check.

"A gift from the German Rangers, Herr Burgomeister," he said. "Build the finest school on the Guadalupe. And buy books—many books for a fine library."

The Guadalupe country was as peaceful as any quiet valley of the Rhine when the German Rangers laid down their arms and their commander rode back to New Braunfels. Holman meant to resume his studies of four-legged varmints. But Texans came swarming to hear how he'd trapped the two-legged kind.

Eventually he ran away from notoriety, as killers and long riders had fled from his shooting irons. For a few cents an acre, he bought a big spread in the thinly populated Shingle Hills above Austin. There he began ranching in a community of Scotch-Irish mountaineers, forced from their own native peaks of the Cumberland and Ozarks by the steady pressure of slavery.

Near him lived a family named Preece that had said farewell to Kentucky after the slaveowners started extending their tobacco plantations across the rocky valleys of the Cumberlands. The Preeces boasted of their kinship with a lank Illinois lawyer named Abraham Lincoln whose speeches against slavery and the Mexican War Holman had read in the German paper which he received from St. Louis. Will Preece had a daughter named Lizzie.

Lizzie clamped fingers on her nostrils whenever the Professor lit up his pipe while making a neighborly call. She threatened him with hellfire for playing the fiddle and reading "worldly books." But hellfire scared Joe Holman not a whit more than gunfire did, and he wound up marrying the prim girl half his age.

His children multiplied with his herds over the prosperous years that followed. Lizzie never led him to the mourners' bench, but his broad tolerance made him respect his wife for her staunch qualities as a frontier woman. His fellow

ranchers kept electing him president of the local school board. On Sundays, after church services, they flocked to his ranch to hear him read and interpret the news from the *Texas Gazette* and the *New York Tribune*.

Then came the first cannonade at Fort Sumter. Joe Holman saw his duty plain, like the Germans on the Guadalupe and the Scotch-Irish in his own stretch of hills. A hysterical minority had stampeded Texas out of the Union into the Confederacy. He knew that if the South's planter interests won this war, cow country would become cotton or tobacco country—and slave country.

So he cast his lot with Abraham Lincoln, now sitting in the White House, as did the Scotch-Irish, the Germans, and the Texas Mexicans still farther west. Age and rheumatism kept him from active service with that guerrilla outfit called the Texas Eagles, which ex-Ranger Dick Preece, his brother-in-law, organized to hold the hills for Lincoln and the Union.

But a liaison man was needed between the Scotch-Irish of the Shingle Hills and the Germans of the Balcones. Joe Holman, bound by marriage to one and by blood to the other, knowing every mountain trail, was chosen for the assignment.

For two long years, he rode a gentle pony, easy on his legs, from one group to the other, carrying news and messages of encouragement back and forth. With compatriots of Fredericksburg and other German settlements, he established an "underground railroad" which passed on Union refugees and escaping slaves from one "station" to the other till they could contact the Texas Federal forces being recruited at Matamoras on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

When the Unionist guerrillas left the hills in 1863 to join the U. S. regulars, Holman assumed responsibility for their women and children. He supervised the families in the planting of crops, then helped them cache the harvests in caves unknown to prowling Confederate commissary officers. So that ignorance would not be the price exacted by war from the youngsters, he reopened a deserted schoolhouse and taught the classes himself.

He was helping a family sow a corn crop on that spring day in 1865 when a Union man rode up to tell him that the Confederacy had fallen. Its rulers had fled Richmond, their capital. But also in flight were the Texas state officials who had given it allegiance. They had decamped from Austin between suns, and had last been seen riding fast horses toward Mexico.

Holman laid down his seed bag. "The Confederacy is finished and we are again one country," he said slowly. "That is good. But Texas is left without a government—that is bad."

With authority gone, the Lone Star State was convulsed by a new wave of outlawry. Armed gangs shot up towns and pillaged stores in broad daylight. Brand burners swarmed across the ranges. Stage lines suspended operations. Banks closed their doors, partly because the Confederate currency in their tills was worthless and partly to prevent what gold they had in their safes from being stolen.

One month after Lee's surrender at Richmond, Holman heard through a reformed outlaw that a notorious band was riding over the hills toward Austin. They planned to swoop down on the almost vacant capital and make off with the gold in the state treasury.

Joe Holman picked up the pistol that

had been so effective an answer to the depredations of bad men when he'd led the German Rangers. Still a good gun, still capable of holding its own in any shooting match. A better gun than its owner was now a man.

The gun slid from his hand to his lap as he dozed off in old-man slumber. Sleep shut out the pleasant noises of the cat purring on the hearth rug and a rooster crowing outside. Lizzie entered on tiptoe to keep from waking him. She bent down to pick up the gun. But the hiss of beans boiling over made her hurry back to the kitchen.

"I hereby commission you as a special Ranger of the state of Texas to serve until—" The voice crashed in on his siesta like the echo of all the battles he'd ever fought. The voice of Governor Wood swearing him in to hound the hell out of hellhounds.

He awoke with a start, rubbing his eyes. Bit by bit, familiar things asserted themselves over the maundering dreams of an old man. The smell of beans boiling—the sight of the wheezy organ on which Lizzie played her doleful hymns. This was not 1847, but 1865—and George Wood was no longer governor. Pendleton Murrah was in the capitol now—no, that was a mistake because Murrah was now fleeing like a horse thief from a Ranger company.

"Schweinehund!" he muttered. Running away when other Southern governors stayed on their jobs to protect their people till the Federal commanders came! George Wood would have remained on duty—and now thieves plotted to loot the state treasury. . . .

He lifted the gun, letting his fingers stray reminiscently over its barrel. Enchanted Rock—the Guadalupe settlements—the freight roads. The weapon's touch brought back all the places

where he'd been assigned "to serve until—"

He shook his head, trying to remember the last word spoken by George Wood on that day, so many years ago.

"To serve until—DISCHARGED!" The word echoed clearly and compellingly from that earlier crisis stemming, like this one, from war and outlawry. That day when he'd been commissioned he remembered vividly—November 18, 1847. But on what day had that mandate as a lawman ended?

He tugged at his patriarchal beard. Other dates he recalled distinctly. His graduation day from the University of Heidelberg. That morning, twenty-one years ago, when he'd first set foot in Texas. The anniversary of his marriage—the birthday of each of his children. Yet one day, important as all the rest, teased him with its vagueness.

His mind searched the past, striving to find some link with the present. Come to think of it, he couldn't recollect getting any discharge. No piece of paper had ever come to notify him that he'd ceased being a Texas Ranger.

Joe Holman stood up straight. "I'm still a Ranger," he told himself "I still have the authority to—" he paused an instant to define the task—"to stop the gang that's moving in on the treasury."

He took his holster from its nail on the wall and buckled it tightly around his waist. *A governor may run*, he thought grimly. *A Ranger can't.*

There was no guessing about the route that the bunch would be taking to Austin. The open trail that led south through the Shingle Hills from Burnet County. For these days, outlaws didn't bother with secret trails.

Lizzie called to him shrilly when he rode away on his pony. Her face blanched when she saw the old gun raised high

with the gnarled hand that waved her good-by.

Twenty miles north he headed, along the open trail paralleling the right bank of the Colorado River to bandit-ridden Burnet County. The veins of his rheumatic legs began paining him the moment he mounted his horse. Every mile on that score of miles, he wanted to stop the horse and light down for a rest. But he was afraid he might be unable to get back on.

He neared the narrow ford that separated his own county of Travis from Burnet. Fifty yards away, he let the tired pony halt to nuzzle at some grass. From a thicket on the Burnet County side, seven men strained their eyes to peer at him.

One of them pointed a trembling finger. "Professor Buckshot. Damned if he ain't ridin' again."

"Ridin' after us, most likely," growled a second. "Some rattle-tongue must have let him know we're aimin' to h'ist that gold. I sure wouldn't want him standin' between it and us."

"Me neither. Let's git him."

Seven outlaws raised seven rifles. Seven bullets came whistling across the river. Blood spurted from Joe Holman's mouth to dye the long gray beard a livid red, flooded down his belly from two bullets that crashed through his lungs. His feet began sagging in the stirrups as they had on that first day when he'd gone out for Ranger duty. His eyes began to dim; the green terrain about him started turning black. One hand clutched desperately at the pony's bridle; the other fumbled weakly at his holster.

"To serve until—" He heard George Wood's voice from infinities away, infinities of years from those quiet cloisters of Heidelberg to these battle-swept hills

of Texas. Then his hand moved briefly with its old strength as it jerked out the Colt and aimed it toward the thicket. But his fingers curled around emptiness when it sought the trigger in that growing dark.

Got to—got to find the trigger, he thought. Missed it—somehow. Mustn't miss— The fingers groped in an arc around the trigger and kept failing to touch it.

Another volley roared at him from the ambush; more bullets ripped his flesh. The dimness turned into a complete blue. But that instant, when he fell heavily from the saddle, his finger found the trigger.

The pistol went off as he hit the ground. That last shot flying somewhere off into the air might have been his final salute to law. The pistol dropped limply from his hand.

The outlaws listened nervously when they heard the shot. "He went down," the leader said after its echo had died. "Likely cashed in. But we ain't comin' in his gun range to check."

"Right, Buck," another replied. "I didn't like the sound of that hog iron goin' off. Let's take a roundabout way. That old feller's full of more tricks than a pack of foxes."

The outlaws detoured down the hidden trails to the capital city. On the outskirts of Austin, they ran into a squad of Federal

soldiers from the command of General George A. Custer, who had arrived the day before to restore order in Texas. The soldiers were doing simple patrol duty, but the jittery thieves gave themselves away by drawing their guns. They were captured by the troopers, and the only toll they ever took of the treasury was the cost of the gallows that hanged them.

A searching party, mobilized by Lizzie Holman, found her husband's body. Sixty-seven he was, when he made that last scout and fired his last shot.

After his burial, Dick Preece, now a sergeant with Custer's garrison in Austin, went through his effects.

Dick found his Ranger's severance papers along with his marriage certificate, the birth records of the children, and a diploma, printed in Latin, attesting that one Joseph von Holtzmann was a graduate, *magna cum laude*, of the University of Heidelberg.

The diploma meant little to Dick, since his second language was lead and not latin. But he carefully scanned the Ranger document whose seal had never been broken by the man who had received it.

"Joe just plumb forgot ever to read this thing," Dick commented to Lizzie. "But 'twoudn't have meant much to him if he had. He had to write his own discharge—and write it in death."





The SUDDEN SILENCE

by William Heuman

EACH night after supper it was a ritual for Billy to shine up the silver star. He was doing it now, sitting on the floor in the entrance way between the kitchen and the parlor. Martha Crowley watched him as she listened to Will talk.

The smell of fried potatoes and steak still lingered in the kitchen as they sat at the table. Will Crowley toyed with the handle of his cup, the coffee in it long since cold.

"This bunch from the Brazos is pullin' out on the eight-o'clock train tonight. They were the worst. Reckon it shouldn't be so bad tonight."

Martha looked at him, at his lean, tanned face, the long-fingered brown hand playing idly with the cup handle. His eyes were gray, very soft now as he watched his four-year-old son on the floor. He had high cheekbones and straight black hair—almost Indian hair

In every saloon men made daily wagers that her lawman husband wouldn't live out the next twenty-four hours. So far, they'd always lost . . .

—with the first silverish tint coming to the temples.

Looking at him, Martha knew that he was a man who would turn gray early, and that it would in no way detract from his appearance. He would always be a handsome man.

"There will be others," Martha said slowly, "just as bad."

In the five years that she'd been married to him—the same five years that he'd been town marshal of this railhead Kansas town of Valhalla—she had watched them ride in on ponies as wild as themselves. Leaving their trail herds bedded down on the open plains, they came in to paint the town red.

They were mostly Texans and mostly young men, all of them armed, all of them proud of their six-gun prowess. With drink in them and money in their pockets, with the hot blood racing through their veins, with two dead months in which they pushed their herds along the dusty trail from Texas to make up, it was not surprising that they ran into trouble with the law.

"Can't too much blame 'em," Will often said. "Might crow a little, myself, if I'd spent two months ridin' behind them ornery Texas steers. They ain't much company, Martha."

Little Billy had polished the star to his satisfaction now, and throwing away the little piece of flannel, he walked up to his father with the five-pointed star, holding it out proudly.

"Obliged," Will said gravely. He examined the star critically, holding it up to the light, before he pinned it on his gray flannel shirt.

Martha Crowley looked at it. That star was a symbol—a symbol of the law and order in Valhalla which her husband enforced. It was something else, too. It was a target—a dimly shining target in the night for the bullets of drink-crazed Texas riders, of hired bad men, of furtive footpads. . . .

Little Billy said, "Shoot all the bad men. Kill every one."

Martha saw Will's thin lips press tightly together for a moment, and then relax again. He said softly:

"Reckon we don't want to kill anybody, Billy. When they're bad we put them in jail."

Martha remembered that in his five years in this hard-bitten trail town he had killed only two men with his gun, and in both cases he'd had no alternative. Nightly, he used his gun only as a club to quell the most troublesome of the

celebrants before hauling them off to the jailhouse where they could sleep off the effects of strong drink and the barrel of his .44.

Will was getting up now. It was nearly eight o'clock, time to make his first rounds of the town. The evening was hot and still and dusty as usual, the sun falling behind the ragged rim of the Catamount Range, but still retaining much of its daytime heat.

A fly buzzed around Martha's head as she sat there at the table, looking at the dishes and the remains of their evening meal. She brushed the insect away with a movement of her hand. She felt the fear creeping over her the way it did each night when he got ready to leave and cross the railroad tracks.

For five years she had felt this fear nightly, and each night it became worse. In the beginning only a few trail herds had come up from the south, and a few dozen riders roamed the town, mingling with the local hardcases. It had been bad enough then.

Now they were coming in by the hundreds, herd after herd, forming an almost continuous line of slowly moving cattle from the Texas border to Kansas, and with each herd rode a dozen or more trail riders. The population of Valhalla had grown from two hundred to nearly two thousand, most of them transients; many of the riders took the train to Chicago after they'd had their little celebration here, and then returned to the south.

Martha Crowley sat at the table and watched Will walk into the bedroom, Billy trailing after him. Each night Will went through a little ritual just as his son did, except that Will's was with the .44.

He would strap on the gunbelt, and then slide the six-gun from the worn

black-leather holster. Mechanically, he would break the gun, eject all the cartridges, and then insert them again, giving the cylinder a spin or two before placing the gun back in the holster.

When he came out of the bedroom, he had on his black, flat-crowned Stetson. Martha stood up and he took off his hat and kissed her. He said softly:

"Don't be worryin'. That Brazos bunch will be gone, and they were the worst. They caused all the trouble last week."

"All right," Martha murmured. "All right, Will. Be careful."

He squeezed her arm and went out, and her heart cried out after him, *Be careful, Will, be careful! Come back, Will. . . .*

She went out on the porch to watch him walk south toward the tracks a hundred yards away. The eight-o'clock eastbound was at the station, smoke gushing from its stack.

Will walked without haste, a tall, spare man, the sun casting his shadow on the left side of the worn boardwalk. As he approached the tracks he lifted a hand to the engineer in the cab, and the man waved back to him. He went across the tracks, then, in front of the train, and he went down a grade, passing from sight. Martha Crowley already could hear the first faint rumblings of sound as Valhalla, south of the tracks, stretched itself and came alive like a big, well-fed, vicious cat.

She stood there on the porch, hands clenched at her sides, stiff, her face haggard. When she heard Billy at her side she picked him up, held him close for a moment, and then carried him inside. The long night had begun.

He came back at four o'clock every morning, when most of the saloons and gambling houses started to close up. A

few remained open all through the night and into the next day, but by four most of Valhalla's population below the tracks was too befuddled with drink and weariness to do anyone any harm.

The train whistle was tooting its farewell and moving across the open plains toward the east as Martha busied herself with the dishes. She had the kettle boiling on the stove and her hot water ready. She put another big pail full of water across the hot part of the stove for Billy's bath. It wasn't Saturday night, but he'd been playing in the dirt of the yard all day.

For a while she was able to forget as she hurried through with the dishes, and then poured the water into the galvanized tub and stripped off Billy's clothes.

Bath time was always play time, and Billy enjoyed it. Martha was talking to him gaily when the gun banged across the tracks. She had a piece of soap in her hand and she stopped, the soap raised, sweat breaking out all over her body.

"Boom," little Billy said. "Gun, Mommy."

She continued to wash the boy, but she was listening now, straining her ears although the sound of a .45 or a .44 could be heard a much longer distance than the few blocks from the house across the tracks to south Valhalla.

There were no other shots, and she told herself that her fears were ridiculous. Guns were always booming in Valhalla. Men shot at targets in back lots, or a drunken cowpuncher sent a bullet at the weathervane atop the Emerald Livery stable. She could imagine Will talking calmly with the man now, warning him not to throw lead around recklessly.

It could have been that, or it could have been something else. It could have been Will lying in the dust of the road, his life blood ebbing out. . . .

She listened for footsteps on the gravel outside, steps which would tell her a messenger was bringing the news of Will's death. Fifteen minutes passed before she knew it was all right.

When she finally got little Billy into bed she was shaking. She had to sit down for a few minutes before tidying up the house.

The noise from across the tracks was increasing in volume now. She could hear occasional wild whoops. Several times guns were fired, followed by more whoops. It was only when a gun was fired and there were no whoops that she worried: then it meant that the shooting could be in earnest. But she heard no more such shots after that first one early in the evening.

At ten o'clock she went out on the porch and sat down with her chair facing south toward the tracks. A red glow illuminated the main street, and when a horseman rode by, his horse's hoofs kicking up dust, the alkali particles hung in the still air, glittering.

It was hot and there was no breeze. Once Martha went into the kitchen and got a dipperful of cold water from the water pail. She looked in at Billy sleeping calmly, one arm across his chest, and then she went out on the porch again and sat down.

A group of riders were down at the depot now. They were singing maudlin, ribald ballads. Once the noise started to come closer as if the singers were crossing the tracks and entering the residential district, which was strictly forbidden; suddenly the singing stopped, and Martha Crowley wondered if Will had come up and turned them back.

She had her moment of pride in her man, remembering that there wasn't another man in town who would take his job for any kind of money. The marshal of Valhalla walked constantly with death; in every saloon and gambling house men made daily wagers that he wouldn't live out the next twenty-four hours.

It wasn't worth it, though, not the big money he received nor the prestige which went with it. She had never mentioned it to Will, but a thousand times she wished he'd resign so they could go to another town where he could open a store or go into some kind of business.

He had always been a lawman, though, even before she'd met him. Deputy sheriff in Grant City for several years, and marshal in Waynesville, another tough trail town. She had met him in Waynesville, where her father ran a little dry-goods store; shortly after that he'd been asked to come to Valhalla.

The silver star he wore on his shirt now was a part of him; he could no more walk the streets of any town without a star on his shirt than another man could without boots on his feet. He had never said that, but Martha Crowley knew it. She said nothing, but she stayed awake nights, listening for him . . . listening for the footfalls of the man who would bring news of his death.

At eleven-thirty she still sat on the porch. Now south Valhalla was really booming. She heard a girl scream once, loud and high against the bawling of the stock in the holding pens along the siding. Pianos were tinkling in a dozen saloons. The six-piece orchestra in the Dixie Dance Hall played almost continuously.

There were no more attempts to cross the tracks into forbidden territory. The residential district slept peacefully because one man with a gun had proclaimed the law and made it stick.

She sat up till nearly twelve o'clock before starting to go to bed. She took a long time getting ready, combing her long hair endlessly, knowing how little sleep she would get anyway before Will came in.

She had another look at Billy. Then she went to the screen door and she stood there for some time, listening, looking toward the tracks.

She noticed that the stock had stopped bawling and were silent, but the men were not. It was a steady, low roar, interspersed now and then with raucous yells. At the depot a rider was emptying his gun at the moon, shooting steadily, one shot following the other until the chambers were empty.

At last Martha Crowley went to bed. She lay there with her eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. Her throat was dry. She got up for another drink.

After a while she fell asleep, and she did not know if she had slept ten minutes or two hours before she awoke. It wasn't the gun which awakened her, although a gun had been fired. It was the silence—the quick and the sudden silence which had come to south Valhalla following on the heels of the shot. Always in the past this had been the little tribute the citizens south of the tracks paid to death.

A man had died tonight, and for a few moments the pianos stopped and the dancing stopped in the Dixie Dance Hall. The drunks stopped singing and men gathered in little knots on the corners and on saloon porches. And in

the dust of the road or in the sawdust of a barroom a man lay motionless.

Martha Crowley sat up stiff and straight in the bed, the silence weighing down upon her. Her heart pumped wildly and her breathing was fast and uneven. A man had died. . . .

She waited, listening for the footfalls on the gravel path outside, praying that they would not come. A cold sweat covered her body and she shivered as she waited.

After a while a piano started to tinkle and the spell was broken. Valhalla, south of the tracks, picked up where it had left off. The noise increased gradually like the sound of an approaching train. The body of the dead man must have been taken to the coroner's shack behind the Emerald Livery.

Martha Crowley's breath came more evenly and the sweat started to dry on her face. No one had come to the house to bring her the news that Will Crowley was dead.

She got out of bed to have another look at Billy. She glanced at the clock on the dresser. Quarter past one; still several hours before Will came home. But he was safe—safe.

She was getting back into bed, breathing a prayer of thanks, when she heard the gate hinge squeak. Then came steps on the gravel path leading to the porch. Slow, hesitating steps. . . .

Martha stood up, her heart pounding again, her legs weak. Inwardly, she cried out, *No—no—no!*

She knew what it was now—why the delay in bringing her the news. No one had volunteered to come to tell her that Will was dead. It had taken them a while to get someone to do it, and the messenger outside was now hesitating, unwilling to awaken her and tell her what he had to tell her.

The messenger was coming again

now, boots grating slightly on the gravel. She heard him step onto the porch and she felt sick and faint.

She had to open the door. It was locked from the inside. Will had his own key when he came home, but he was never coming home again—not tonight . . . not any night.

She walked woodenly through the parlor, trying not to think. She had to get control of herself, for Billy's sake.

A lamp burned on a table near the door in the parlor, the wick turned down low. She stopped to turn it up, and then she heard the knock on the door. The last remnants of doubt disappeared. For a few moments she had hoped that the steps on the path had sounded before the next house.

She released the catch and opened the door. A man she did not know stood in the patch of yellow lamplight on the porch. He was tall and young and dressed in the garb of the Texas trail riders—worn, faded Levi's, flannel shirt, flat-crowned hat, dusty boots. A six-gun was strapped around his waist.

Martha Crowley saw the yellow stubble on his chin, the beard of a boy who shaved infrequently. He had pale blue eyes and a narrow face.

He was drunk, and he stood on the porch swaying a little, jaw sagging, looking at her blankly. Then he took his hat off and his mouth worked a little before he got the words out.

"Ain't this Mamie Carson's boardin' house?"

Martha Crowley looked at him and gripped the door sill with one hand.

The Texan licked his lips nervously. "Reckon it ain't," he muttered. "Reckon I'm lost, ma'am."

Martha Crowley started to laugh. Softly at first, and then it was as if a

door had been unlocked, and the laughter became wild, almost uncontrollable. She maintained her grip on the door sill, and she saw the Texan staring at her stupidly, twisting his hat in his hands.

Will Crowley came up the gravel path, walking swiftly. When he came up on the porch he grabbed the Texan's arm, turning him around. He stared at his wife, and then he released the drunk and stepped up to her.

"Martha—Martha," he said quietly.

He held her until she was finally able to control herself, and then he said sternly, "What has he done?"

"Nothing," Martha murmured. "He hasn't done anything, Will. He's lost!" she gasped.

"I'll head him back across the tracks," Will growled. "Joe Foley told me he saw one of them headin' this way."

"He's all right," Martha said. "Don't be harsh with him, Will. He's lost."

Will Crowley stared at her curiously. "Sure everything is all right, Martha?" he asked slowly.

"It's all right," she assured him. "There's nothing to worry about, Will."

She said it with conviction, although she did not really know why. It was going to be all right from now on. The terrible fear had passed. She had somehow discovered her own strength.

"I'll go along," Will said. He took the young Texan's arm. "Better go back to bed, Martha."

He went down the path and she could hear him talking with the Texan, and then she closed and locked the door. Turning down the lamp, she looked in at Billy's room. Then she went to her own room and got into bed. She went to sleep almost at once.



by
Walt
Sheldon

Sam Tanner was a reporter—the eternal neutral party—but he couldn't help taking sides when he saw the bravery of an old Sioux Chief.

IT began on the train to Black Spring, though Sam Turner didn't realize it was the beginning of anything. It began with a glimpse of a flat-crowned sailor straw on a pile of reddish-gold hair, and, against the receding Dakota landscape, a profile perfect as the image on a cameo brooch.

He had wandered rearward to the observation car because an alcoholic and overimaginative old Indian fighter in the smoker had been numbing his ears with patent lies about the border wars, now nearly two decades old. He hadn't at all expected this pleasant vision, this diversion. And now he opened the green-curtained door to the platform, tipped his mouse-colored derby, and said, "Good afternoon, ma'am!"

"Good afternoon." She was formal.

"Nice afternoon."

"Yes." Nice enough. No use spoiling it with a lot of talk.

Tanner sat on the rail. Wind and cinders curled by. The wheels clacked away, and the rumpled prairie swirled past. The wind tugged at his derby, he grabbed for it, then remembered it was fastened by a cord to his lapel. He felt suddenly a little foolish in it, here at the edge of the border, and vowed to get other clothes at Fort Carlson when they arrived—his boss, Mr. Abel Kingfield, publisher of the Chicago Day-Herald had sent him off so quickly he hadn't had time to find a wardrobe appropriate to the border. And no use asking a man like Kingfield for a delay—no use arguing with him about anything.

"Going all the way to Black Spring?" he asked the girl.

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Alone." And getting along very nicely, thank you, her eyes said.

He almost laughed. In spite of the

rebuff this was probably the most entertaining encounter he'd have during the whole trip. The rest was cut-and-dried.

Abel Kingfield had been instrumental in getting this Indian Agent, Jack McCabe, his post at Black Spring—the way Tanner understood it, both men came from the same home town. Kingfield meant for McCabe to go further. Kingfield, maker of men, manipulator of events, was going to make a hero of McCabe. Nothing to it. The Sioux Chief, Brave Eagle, was squatting a half-mile outside the reservation and now they were going to arrest him for it and Sam Tanner was going along with notebook and pencil to make it sound—per Kingfield's instructions—like the greatest thing since the Battle of Bunker Hill. Well, what the devil, Kingfield paid well for what he wanted . . . whenever Sam Tanner's conscience began to pile up on him that weekly check would come along and ease the strain somewhat.

He said now to the girl. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Sam Tanner."

"How do you do." Still overpolite, still formal.

"You're—uh—Miss—?"

"Mrs— Mrs. Howell."

"Oh." The note of disappointment in his voice was not entirely subtle. The name sounded familiar for a moment, but he supposed that was because it was common enough. "Your—your husband's not travelling with you, I take it?"

"My husband's been dead three years."

He said quickly. "I'm terribly sorry."

"It's all right." Her smile became a bit more genuine now. "I've managed to forget it a little; I've managed to keep busy."

"Yes." He thought for an instant how keeping busy helped his own conscience in the matter of Kingfield's demands. "I'm not burdened with much spare time, myself. I'm a correspondent for

the Chicago Day-Herald. Our boss, Mr. Kingfield, he keeps us—"

She was staring at him, and it seemed to Tanner that she had suddenly become pale, and now she was rising from the wicker chair—

"Is something wrong?"

She said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Tanner!"

"Hey! Wait!" He wasn't sure whether to laugh at her behavior or not.

She slipped quickly through the glass door and he could see her patter stiffly down the length of the observation car, her long, wasp-waisted linen jumper rustling with each step.

Tanner shook his head, then scratched it. He took a thin cigar from the breast pocket of his checkered coat, leaned out of the wind to light it, then sat upright again and stared once more where the girl had gone. He considered for a moment following her. But then he realized he'd doubtless have a chance to find her in Black Spring tomorrow—they were scheduled there this evening. He yawned and looked at the stretching, dust-hazy sky and the rolling, sea-like prairie. . . .

He rose early the next morning in his guest room in the bark-slab Fort Carlson officers' quarters. He had not slept well on a string bed and straw mattress—it would take some getting used to—and he had been bored till midnight the previous evening with the polite chatter of the Colonel and his staff at the officers' mess. He had been disappointed at not meeting Jack McCabe, the agent, right away and getting the preliminary arrangements over with. McCabe had been at the town of Black Springs, a few miles down the river, but he would presumably be in his agency headquarters at the edge of the Fort Carlson compound this morning.

Tanner ate a light breakfast at the mess cabin, avoiding conversation as much as possible with the officers, then

strolled across the dusty quadrangle toward the squat log building with the wide front porch that housed the Indian agency. There were a number of blue-clad soliders about, most of them busy at chores, and the stable police were leading a dozen horses to the picket line, a rope suspended on forked poles and kept taut at either end by deadman logs, to be saddled for drill. There were a few agency Indians here and there lazing in the morning sun, clad in their typical dark store blankets to which strips of colored and beaded muslin had been added.

He clomped across the agency porch, pushed the door open and came into a large room with an issue counter at one end and several desks and tables at the other. Behind the largest desk sat a stocky, bald man, deeply tanned and sporting a fine sweep of sandy mustache. He was talking to a tall, slack-shouldered Indian in denim pants and a blue Army blouse. Both men looked at Tanner as he came in.

"This Mr. McCabe?" Tanner asked the bald-headed man.

"I'm Major McCabe, yes." He had a sharp, reedy voice.

Tanner recalled then that U. S. Indian Agents were given the honorary rank of major—though some didn't insist on hearing the title. He smiled a little. "Tanner, Major. Chicago Day-Herald."

"Oh, yes! Fine!" McCabe brightened, rose from the desk, came forward and offered his hand. "Been expecting you, Tanner! Been expecting you! And, by golly, you got here just in time!"

"I did?"

"Tanner, I want you to meet Three Horse, the Captain of my Indian Police." McCabe turned, beaming, toward the slender Indian. "We were just discussing the very thing you came here for, weren't we, Three Horse?"

Three Horse nodded—sullenly, thought Tanner—and uttered a monosyllable that might have meant anything. He shook

hands with Tanner loosely, Indian-fashion.

McCabe grinned. "Mark him well—I think Three Horse'll be chief of all the Sioux one of these days. He's by far my best man. If we had more like him, and a few less like Brave Eagle, we wouldn't be running into all this resistance."

"Brave Eagle been giving you trouble again?" asked Tanner.

"Nothing you can put your finger on," McCabe waved his stubby hand in a short, nervous gesture. "His attitude—that's the worst of it. And they all listen to his advice. The U. S. Commissioners'll be here in person next month, and they're counting on me to arrange that land sale. Well, Tanner, at the risk of a little pride I might say I know about as much about the Indians as anyone, and I wouldn't have any trouble at all bringing the chiefs into line, except for this charlatan, Brave Eagle."

"I see," said Tanner. It meant little to him. He'd known before coming here how the U. S. Commissioners wanted to buy most of the Sioux reservation land from the Indians and open it for settlement, now that South Dakota was a state, and especially now that gold had been found in the western part. It had struck him that fifty cents an acre was a rather mean price, but he had also decided that none of it was really his business. His job was to witness McCabe's arrest of Brave Eagle, write about it dramatically, telegraph it to Kingfield, and then get back to Chicago himself.

"Well, Tanner," said McCabe, babbling on, "yesterday Brave Eagle refused for the third time to get back on the reservation. He's built his cabin on the creek just beyond the limits—his birthplace there, and he's got that old Indian superstition about living near it. I might add we've been most patient with him, overlooking it for more than a year now. But since he's giving us all this trouble, well, we'll just show

him what the letter of the law means—right?”

“I suppose so,” said Tanner. “Well, when are you going to take him in?”

“Today. Wagons’ll be ready in an hour. Are you all set for it?”

“Sooner the better. I’ll meet you here in an hour. Will that be all right?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“One more thing I’d like to ask, Major.”

“You name it, Mr. Tanner.”

“Do you know a woman named Mrs. Howell somewhere in Black Spring?”

The agent’s eyes widened and he shut his mouth suddenly and tightly. He stared at Tanner for a moment, then said, “Do you know her?”

“Met her on the train coming up. Thought I’d look for her here—”

“Mr. Tanner,” said McCabe, his breath wheezing through his words, “Mrs. Joan Howell is one woman I’d seriously advise you to have nothing to do with! Mark me on that!”

“What on earth’s wrong with her?”

“Certainly you recall who she is, sir. Your paper ran quite a story on it. I sent in the facts myself.”

Suddenly Tanner remembered where he’d heard the name before. Joan Howell. He even remembered the streamer in twenty-four point type on the story. SHE LOVES BRAVE EAGLE—WHITE WIDOW FASCINATED BY RED CHIEF. He remembered thinking it at once an example of Mr. Kingfield’s doubtful taste and of his genius for titillating his readers. Briefly, as he recalled it now, Mrs. Joan Howell, active in the rather naive and misty-eyed National Indian Defense Association, had come to the Black Spring Agency to help Brave Eagle, advising him, taking care of his correspondence, painting his portrait, and even cooking for him and sweeping out his cabin. The Day-Herald hinted she wished to become one of his squaws. No wonder she had recoiled when he’d told her what his job was!

“I’d still like to talk to her,” he said to McCabe.

The agent smiled, but not too cheerfully. “Well, I heard she got in last night. She’ll be staying at the Prairie Hotel for a guess—only one in town. But I doubt you’ll have to go that far. My surmise is she’ll be sniffing around the fort and agency here this morning.”

“Thanks,” said Tanner. “I’ll see you in an hour.” He went out.

He started slowly across the quadrangle again looking at the dust and frowning a little. He hadn’t liked McCabe much, and he wasn’t looking forward with much pleasure to the day or two he’d have to spend with him. Get it over with, he figured; get back to Chicago and start working hard again. Ought to be a raise coming along presently. He’d be able to stick twelve-fifty into the bank every week instead of just ten. In about five years he’d have enough. There was a little town in Colorado where he’d been raised, and there was a little weekly newspaper there he still ought to be able to buy—

Behind him Mrs. Joan Howell’s voice—and he recognized it immediately—said, “Mr. Tanner!”

He turned. She was in a wool shirt and fringed buckskin riding skirt this morning, but still with that fairly silly sailor straw hatpinned at a dizzy angle to her reddish hair. “Good morning, Mrs. Howell,” he said.

Her eyes seemed troubled. Before she spoke she touched her teeth to her under lip momentarily. “I wonder—I wonder if you’ll forgive me for being rude on the train yesterday. It was a personal matter—an upsetting thing—and—”

“I understand what it was.” He smiled. “I realized it this morning.”

Then she matched his smile and said, “And I realized after I cooled off that of course you yourself probably had nothing to do with that story about me in your newspaper.”

“Good.” His smile became a grin.

"Now I guess we can start all over again."

"Well—" she tilted her head a bit—"let me start, Mr. Tanner, by being frank. I came here this morning to ask a favor."

"Name it, and it's yours." He made a mock bow.

"You'd better hear it first. I understand you're going up to Brave Eagle's cabin this morning, isn't that right?"

"You must have pretty good spies around the agency. It's right."

"You'd be surprised, Mr. Tanner. I *do* have sources of information. I know, for instance, that Major McCabe's planning on more than just a simple arrest when he gets there."

"What do you mean by that?"

"If you'll arrange to take me along, I'll tell you. I know McCabe won't want any part of me—but if you insist he can't stop me. I'd go myself, except that I can't find transportation anywhere in town."

"You're bargaining with me," he said, still grinning. "You're committing blackmail. You know I'll want to hear it if you've got a story. You knew before you came here I wouldn't be able to refuse."

"Well—something like that." She grinned back.

"In that case," he said, "the least you can do is come have coffee with me." He stepped beside her and offered her his bent arm. She laughed, took it, and then walked with him toward the officers' mess.

There were two wagons, each drawn by two government mules, readied for the trip to Brave Eagle's cabin on Willow Creek, eight miles northwest of the agency and fort. A blue-clad private sat in the driver's seat of each, and they were taken, about nine-thirty, before the big porch of the agency building.

Tanner and Joan Howell had finished coffee by then. Tanner had tried to make her enlarge on her hint that McCabe

planned more than a simple arrest, but she had refused to talk about it there in the officers' mess. She would tell him after they started out, she insisted.

And now they walked together to the wagons and reached them just as the honorary major, Jack McCabe, was stepping down from his porch. He stopped in the middle of a step and his eyebrows rose quickly when he saw the girl. He flicked his eyes back and forth several times between Tanner and Joan Howell—clearly trying to figure it out, whatever it was.

"I've asked Mrs. Howell," said Tanner, walking right up to him, getting it over with, "to come along with us this morning."

"Oh, you have, have you?" McCabe couldn't seem to decide which of them to fix his eyes upon.

"Didn't suppose you'd object," said Tanner mildly.

"Well, Mr. Tanner, I'm sorry to say I do object. This here meddling female has caused me more consternation and worry than any other single person I ever met. Besides that, I have no time for loose moraled—"

"McCabe." Tanner interrupted quietly but sharply.

McCabe stared at him for a moment then said coldly, "Yes, Mr. Tanner?"

"You shouldn't have said that, McCabe."

"No?" McCabe took his hands down from his hips, held them slightly curled at his sides. For a moment it looked as though he was about to defy Tanner fully—and then abruptly a troubled expression crossed his face, like a wisp of night cloud passing before the moon. Tanner could almost guess what was going on in the man's mind. Quarrel or no quarrel he still wanted that story about Brave Eagle's arrest written—his career would depend on it. He could make himself swallow a humility or two for that. McCabe now smiled suddenly, with patent insincerity. "Now, look here,

"Tanner," he said, "there's no use of us getting all riled up over an unimportant matter. I'm not a difficult man to get along with. If you really insist that Mrs. Howell accompanies us this morning—"

"I'll have to insist you take that remark back, too."

"Well—all right, if it means that much." He turned to the girl. "Accept my apologies, ma'am, for an unthinking remark passed in the heat of anger."

"I accept them, Mr. McCabe." She spoke flatly.

"And now what do you say we all get going," said McCabe. "We've got more important things to worry about this morning, after all. After this is all over I'm sure we'll all feel less touchy about everything."

"I hope so, Mr. McCabe," said the girl in a quiet voice that, to Tanner, had a curious, elusive sense of warning in it.

Some minutes later the wagons moved off. McCabe sat in the lead wagon, Tanner and Joan Howell side by side in the second. Their driver was a dark, gloomy man who seemed infinitely more interested in his shifting quid of tobacco than in them—just as well, thought Tanner; he wanted to talk with the girl.

They moved out of the compound of Fort Carlson and onto the dry, rutted trail where new spring grass was already showing between the wheel marks. On their left the river, brown, turbulent, fifty yards across, curled away from them gradually, leaving them to writhe at the feet of the rocky, treeless bluff that overlooked the fort. They dipped into a coulee, came out again. They skirted a rise for a while, then climbed it at a long angle and when they reached the top the fort was already in the distance behind them.

It was time to talk now. "Mrs. Howell—Joan," said Tanner.

"Yes?"

"Now tell me what these plans of McCabe's are."

"Do you really want to know?"

"Naturally. Why do you ask that?"

She tilted her head oddly, frowned a little as she looked at him. "May I be frank, Sam? I've had the feeling it doesn't make much difference to you what happens one way or the other."

He shrugged. "I'm a reporter, Joan. The eternal neutral party. I can't afford to care much what happens—as long as it makes a good story. Surely you can understand that."

"Do you think that story about myself and Brave Eagle was a good one?"

"Not personally. But—try to understand this now—from the newspaper's viewpoint it was a honey."

She was still looking at him in that puzzled way. "Then I don't think I really can explain anything to you. I'd thought for a moment this morning you'd—you'd understand some things. But I guess not. I guess no one really understands."

He said, "Listen, Joan. Maybe I understand more than you think. How's this for a guess, now. You loved your husband very much—so much that your whole life was wrapped up in him. After he died it seemed to you you couldn't possibly think of remarrying—ever. You had to have a new life. You had to have an interest so deep and absorbing that it wouldn't leave time for anything else—not even time for being yourself. That's how you got into this business of trying to help the Indians. Truthfully now, isn't that it?"

She flushed a little as though at first ready to be angry, then seemed to gain control of herself. Finally she nodded tightly and said, "All right, Sam. That's about it. I'm glad you see it that way instead of—well, the way McCabe sees it. At that, I'm not really sure he believes the cock-and-bull story he gave out about myself and Brave Eagle. He must have known anything he could do to hurt my reputation would be to his interest. He knew that I was helping Brave Eagle to be firm, and not

letting anyone pull the wool over his eyes.

"You see, Sam, all the Sioux tribes still respect Brave Eagle and come to him for advice. He knows that selling their reservation land would be the worst thing they could do. McCabe knows if he can somehow get rid of Brave Eagle there are some others weak enough to sell. And when McCabe swings the deal he'll stand in fine with the U.S. Commissioners. He's a terribly ambitious man, Sam—I wouldn't be surprised if he dreams of being a senator or even president some day."

"Well, he does have cause, after all, to arrest Brave Eagle, doesn't he? We can't escape the fact that the chief's actually off the reservation."

"McCabe managed to ignore it for over a year—Brave Eagle's only a half mile off and nobody worries much about it. But now that the Eagle's getting too much in his way he's decided to use it for an excuse. Not just an excuse to put him under arrest for a while, either. An excuse to get rid of him—for good."

"Now, what's this? What do you mean, get rid of him for good?"

"One of the agency Indians came to me this morning, Sam. Most of them trust me more than McCabe in the first place. This Indian told me what McCabe means to do. That pet puppy dog of McCabe's, Three Horse, has always hated Black Eagle, ever since Black Eagle wouldn't admit him into the Antelope Society—a very exclusive warriors' club of theirs. Three Horse is going to have an entire company of Indian police standing by, and as he makes the arrest he's going to deliberately provoke Brave Eagle. They don't mean just to arrest him—they mean to kill him, Sam!"

Tanner stared at her. "It seems incredible!"

"But it's true."

"Are you sure your agency Indian wasn't mistaken?"

"That's possible, of course, but I scarcely feel I want to take a chance on that."

"Well, what do you intend to do?"

"There's only one thing I can do. I can warn Brave Eagle—if McCabe will let me get to him first. I can make sure that Brave Eagle walks so softly there's no possible chance of provocation. I don't think McCabe would try anything too obvious with you looking on—unless he got excited and lost his head."

"I still can't convince myself McCabe really means to kill the chief in cold blood like that. I don't care for McCabe, but still—"

"Sam, will you promise me something anyway? Will you help me get to Brave Eagle first and warn him?"

He looked at her thoughtfully and said, "Well, I guess I can do that much anyway."

An hour later they were more than halfway to Brave Eagle's camp. They followed a small creek for a while and presently made a short halt to water the mules beside a grove of tall cottonwoods. Tanner stepped from the wagon to stretch his legs, then turned and caught Joan lightly at the waist to help her down. When he did that he heard the sound of approaching horses and turned.

There were nearly thirty and they were mounted, bareback, a few with moccasins toed into a chest rope or surcingle. All wore blue Army blouses and sported star badges. Metal Breasts—Indian Police. And all armed with issue 45.70 single-shot carbines, all with canvas cartridge belts for fifty rounds. Three Horse, slender, erect, still sullen, rode at the head.

As Tanner watched, McCabe stepped from the lead wagon and held a long, low-voiced conference with Three Horse.

Tanner walked over to them. He said to McCabe, "Something wrong?"

"Hell, no . . . why should there be anything wrong?"

"All these Indians."

"They're coming with us to arrest Brave Eagle."

"So many of them?"

"Look, Tanner, I know what I'm doing, and what kind of trouble we're like to run into. Maybe you just better let me handle it."

"All right, McCabe," said Tanner, starting to turn. He paused long enough enough to add: "Only I'll be watching the way you handle it. Remember that."

After the short watering rest the wagons and the mounted company moved off together. Tanner and Joan Howell talked about it, frowned, but didn't arrive at any plan that seemed useful: only thing to do was try to keep Brave Eagle from giving McCabe or the Metal Breasts even a small excuse for being violent. . . .

The Indian camp seemed quiet as they approached it, though ravelings of smoke came from the chimney of Brave Eagle's cabin and from the tops of several tipis. There were a few squaws in evidence; one chopping wood, one fetching water. There were the usual lean dogs, and there were horses grazing in the meadow beyond the camp.

McCabe waved his arm and the Metal Breasts began to deploy around the camp. While he was busy with that Tanner and Joan stepped from the wagon and trotted hurriedly toward Brave Eagle's cabin. A number of Indians were appearing now, some emerging from the tipis, most moving toward the cabin.

Brave Eagle himself appeared at the door when they reached the cabin. Tanner, who had supposed the famed chief would be tall and imposing, was surprised to see a stocky man of middle age with rather a kind, relaxed face and intelligent eyes remarkably deep-set for an Indian. Brave Eagle seemed to move slowly, calmly. He wore a buckskin coat faced with porcupine quills. He smiled when

he saw Joan. "Well, hello, Missa Howell!" he said in pretty fair English. "How you?"

"Let's go inside Eagle—quick."

His face became immediately alert. He turned without further talk and led the way. There was one big main room inside the cabin; there was a rude wooden bench along one wall, two mattresses thrown on the floor served as beds.

Joan spoke hurriedly. "This is Mr. Tanner, Eagle. He's a friend—he writes for the newspaper in Chicago. He will tell you, as I do, to be very careful with McCabe and the Metal Breasts today. They want an excuse to kill you."

Brave Eagle looked at Tanner questioningly, his face grave now.

"That's right," said Tanner. "The best thing you can do is move back to the reservation—if McCabe will let you."

The Indian swept his hand to the side in the circular sign for a negative and said, "No. That thing I not do. If I go back my people say McCabe tell me what to do. Not such good chief then. Not listen to me—maybe sell this land."

"Eagle," Tanner said, "this is no time to be stubborn. It's a matter of your life—"

"Maybe die, then. Maybe pretty good. People say McCabe kill Brave Eagle, he's bad man, then they don't listen to McCabe. Pretty good, I think."

Tanner shook his head. "You can do more good for your people alive—even as a prisoner at the fort—than you can dead."

Now the old chief smiled gently. "When time comes to die—Indian must go. Outside on that hill two days ago I heard a bird sing. This bird say to me, 'Brave Eagle, you die for your people pretty soon.'"

Tanner was going to make some protest or other about this; laugh at it, call it nonsense—then he looked at Joan, saw that she stared at Brave Eagle queerly, saw that she had become pale,

He remained silent, and the silence hung—

McCabe's voice called suddenly from the outside. "*Tanner! You in there?*"

The chief looked at his two guests. He was still smiling. "Maybe trouble. Maybe you go now."

Tanner turned toward the door. "I'm here, McCabe—so's Brave Eagle. Hold off a minute, will you?"

"*You better come on out, Tanner! That woman, too!*" McCabe called.

"Listen, Eagle," Tanner said to the Indian, "you come out with us. We'll all go slowly, and Joan and I, we'll stick close to you. He won't dare start anything with us in the way."

"Not go," said Brave Eagle.

"Don't be a fool!" said Tanner.

"*You comin'?*" called McCabe. "*I ain't going to wait all day!*"

Tanner frowned with a touch of exasperation. "Eagle, you stay where you are a minute," he said. He turned, went to the door, threw it open. He faced McCabe, who stood there with a carbine crooked under his arm. "McCabe, I'm asking you to reconsider this arrest. Call off your little blue-coated terriers. You've overlooked Brave Eagle staying here a long time—you can overlook it some more."

"You crazy, Tanner?" McCabe's small blue eyes stirred. "That Indian's had his own way long enough—now it's time to show him who's boss around here!"

"Then give me a little more time to talk to him and make him come quietly."

McCabe glared at Tanner steadily. "He's either coming quick, or not at all. Is that clear?"

"A lot's clear to me, McCabe. A lot of things now."

"Meaning just what, Mr. Tanner?"

"You've got no intention of taking him back alive."

"I mean to do just what's my duty, that's all."

"Then give Brave Eagle a little time—give me and Mrs. Howell time."

"Tanner," said McCabe slowly. "I'd advise you and that female to come out of the cabin now. I'm going to wait just one more minute, then we're going to start shooting."

"And if we shouldn't come out?"

"You sure make it hard for me, Tanner. If you and the female don't come out I may just have to do something I wouldn't really want to do. I may have to have the boys start shooting anyway."

Joan called from the middle of the cabin rooms: "You wouldn't dare do that, McCabe!" She moved to Tanner's shoulder. "You'd be hung for it!"

"Would I? Because a couple of foolish meddlers got hurt or killed when the bullets were flying? I don't think so. Not with Three Horse and myself to explain what happened."

Tanner turned his head, looked at Joan soberly. "I'm afraid he's got the whip on this one. You'd better get out of the cabin."

"No." Her voice was almost inaudible; her face was drawn. "I'm staying here. While I do there's still a chance they won't shoot. He may be bluffing—"

"Don't be crazy, Joan!"

"It's no use, Sam. This is the one thing I can do. I'm going to do it."

He looked at Brave Eagle, who still stood quietly in the middle of the room. "Eagle—you make her go. You talk to her—"

There was a strange smile on Brave Eagle's gentle old face. At first Tanner couldn't decide what it meant. He saw Brave Eagle, one hand in the open front of his buckskin jacket, now take three or four slow steps toward them.

And then the Indian—before they could react to it—rushed suddenly past them, jostling Tanner, knocking Joan back a step or two, and uttering his warning grunt he sprang suddenly upon McCabe, where he stood in the doorway.

Tanner saw the flash of the knife Brave Eagle drew from under his jacket.

He heard McCabe's cry of pain. McCabe's carbine went off, shooting to one side, and then Brave Eagle tore the weapon out of McCabe's hands. The Indian broke away suddenly and began to run across the clearing . . . the horses of the Metal Breasts were there by the cottonwoods, forty yards away perhaps—

And now the Indian police surrounding the cabin began to shoot at Brave Eagle. Bullets made little geysers of dirt all about him; some whistled off in ricochet after striking.

"He'll never make it," said Tanner, hardly aware he'd spoken aloud.

A slender, blue-coated figure came from behind a parked wagon suddenly and began to run toward Brave Eagle, almost head on. It was Three Horse, captain of the Indian Police; he held his single-shot carbine ported for a moment across his middle, then brought it to his shoulder. Brave Eagle was a little more than ten yards from him. The old chief had slowed his pace, but was still dodging and weaving as he ran. Now, suddenly, and at first with seeming madness, he leaped high into the air and uttered a piercing shriek—he leaped toward Three Horse.

Three Horse's carbine went off at the same time. Tanner understood, then, why Brave Eagle had shrieked. Even from this distance he could almost see Three Horse's weapon jump nervously as it was fired.

Brave Eagle sprang at Three Horse and the shooting stopped momentarily. Three Horse tried to turn; tried to run. Brave Eagle was too fast. He swung the carbine he'd taken from McCabe and cracked Three Horse with tremendous force on the side of the skull with its stock. Three Horse fell.

The shooting started again. Brave Eagle whirled once more toward the horses.

And then Brave Eagle stumbled—it looked almost casual—fell prone, and lay there, one arm outflung, one

crumpled under him, his cheek to the ground.

McCabe all this time had been staring at his upper arm. It was gashed by Brave Eagle's knife almost to the bone—but apparently no artery hit. McCabe looked at the wound as though he didn't quite believe it. Now suddenly he turned, saw Brave Eagle lying in the clearing, and Three Horse, with his skull crushed, not far from him.

He pointed at Brave Eagle with his good arm. "Shoot him! Fill him full of lead—don't take chances!"

"No, McCabe," said Tanner.

"Shoot him! Shoot him!" McCabe yelled, not hearing Tanner.

There was the time of a pulse beat in which Sam Tanner came to his decision, then. It was not a decision of the mind: it was something of heart, blood-stream and marrow.

He rushed out into the clearing. He waved his arms as he ran, crying hoarsely and maybe a little crazily, "Hold it! Hold your fire! Don't shoot—do you hear?"

But some of the Metal Breasts either didn't hear, or misunderstood; some kept shooting. Several bullets kicked up the dirt around Tanner as they had around Brave Eagle. He was at once terribly frightened, and go-to-hell reckless. He almost enjoyed the danger. He was amazed that he had not been hit when he finally reached Brave Eagle's huddled form; he was hoping in a way that was close to prayer that the old warrior would still be alive. . . .

Then the shooting stopped. Tanner heard running footsteps behind him, glanced back and saw McCabe approaching. McCabe's square, fleshy face was tortured with anger. "Now you did it, Tanner! Interfering with arrest—"

"Shut up, McCabe," said Tanner wearily.

Tanner bent to look at Brave Eagle more closely. He saw the bullet hole between hip and kidney, saw the blood. He had the impression that the barrel of Brave Eagle's chest rose and fell

almost imperceptibly, but he wasn't sure.

McCabe moved up beside Tanner and bent over the Indian, too.

"Tanner," he said, "I've a good mind to prefer charges against you—"

"I'd like that," said Tanner. "That'd be a good chance to tell what's happened here this afternoon—"

McCabe reached down to grab Brave Eagle's arm and turn him over.

Brave Eagle moved so quickly that neither McCabe nor Tanner could prevent it. He moved like a mountain cat. He rolled half over, took McCabe's forearm and pulled him sprawling to the dirt beside him. McCabe cried out in animal terror. Brave Eagle's arm pumped back and forth, striking McCabe in the midriff, and it wasn't until it had happened four times that Tanner realized a knife went home each time it struck. After the fifth blow Brave Eagle fell back again, tried to rise once more, and then died. McCabe, too, lay where he was, and didn't move. . . .

Tanner, still staring, only dimly realized that Joan Howell had come to his side. He put his arm about her, not fully aware of that gesture, either. Seconds passed, and they stood there silently, staring at the dead men on the dark loam at their feet. The Indian Police and the two privates that had driven the wagons now came slowly, and a little hesitantly toward the spot.

"It didn't have to happen," Tanner finally said. He spoke bitterly. "Brave Eagle didn't have to die like that."

"You did all you could, Sam," said Joan.

"Maybe."

"You tried to save him. You could

have been killed yourself." She turned her head toward him suddenly. "Why?"

"Why?" He looked at her, too.

"It wasn't your quarrel."

"Maybe it was," he said thoughtfully. He was thinking how Brave Eagle had been ready to die for his people; he was thinking how Joan had meant to risk her life to stay in the cabin, hoping to prevent the shooting. He said, "Maybe it still is."

"What do you mean, Sam?"

"Kingfield will want a story on this. He'll want McCabe a hero—a martyr. Well, I'll send him a story all right, but not the one he wants. The truth, Joan—and all its means."

"He won't print that story."

"Others will, then." He faced her, pressed her shoulders with both hands. His eyes were close to brightness. "Kingfield doesn't own me any more, Joan—just as McCabe could never own Brave Eagle. I've got a new job. I don't know who I'll be working for, but I'll be looking for the truth from now on. I won't be standing by and letting men like McCabe get away with things; I won't help men like Kingfield to make it possible."

"Sam—"

"Yes?"

"That's a hard job, Sam."

"I know."

"It's even harder when you're alone."

"I know that, too," he said. He studied her face for a moment, then, still holding her across the shoulders he swung her quietly away from the spot and walked back toward the wagon with her. "I don't think I'm going to be alone," he said. . . .

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STAMPEDE SMELL

by Will C. Brown

Longhorns are funny, especially when they're out on the trail. But nobody thought a smell could make a herd take off for the horizon.



BIGFOOT brought his tin plate over and said, "Fill 'er up, Crip!" Then he whispered to me, "Watch the fun, now."

He walked around the cook fire, crossing behind the other men. Somewhere that morning he had caught a baby field-mouse and he had it in the pocket of his duckin' coat. The herd hands were squatted on their heels, busy with noon bait of beans, beef and biscuits.

Bigfoot walked behind this young nester we'd picked up at the Brazos and dropped the baby mouse down the back of his open collar, and went on and squatted to eat.

Right then the Kid did everything you would have expected. First he choked, then squawled like a calf being branded, and threw his plate five feet in the air. He started clawing at his

shirt, buttons flying, and everybody roared and Bigfoot whooped louder than all the rest. I had to laugh, too, the Kid's conniptions were so funny.

Finally, the mouse streaked off in the weeds and the Kid got his shirt back on, with all the hands hurraing him and Bigfoot still laughing with tears running down into his whiskers. The Kid came over for a new plate, his face red as paint. That was when I decided the boy had no business making this drive.

After the nooning, the hands rode back to the cattle to start them up the trail again. It was the first Chisholm trip for the Carlson outfit and we were taking a big herd to market, near two thousand head.

I crooked a finger to the Kid and he stayed behind a minute. He came over to where I was loading the chuck box.

"That was good grub, Crip," he said.

Far as I could remember, nobody had ever complimented me on my cooking before in my whole life and I nearly forgot what it was I wanted to say to him.

I limped back and forth, busy putting the junk in the wagon, and I told the Kid while I worked. I said, "Kid, ain't none of my business, but you're going to have a rough time on this trip. Might be you ought to head back home. You signed on to the crew only three days ago. We ain't even crossed the Red yet and I reckon you've already found out this here big-mouthed foreman of ours thinks he's quite a practical joker. Well, it's liable to be like that all the way up to Kansas."

The Kid looked serious. He was no more than seventeen, but a strong-built young 'un with quick savvy for his job and a natural knack for working cattle, and even if he was a nester kid he showed to have had good raising.

He studied the toes of his worn-out boots. "I been wanting to make a trail drive a long time, Crip. When this outfit came along and my folks let me sign on, I felt mighty good about it. I got to admit, though, that Bigfoot has made these first three days pretty hard to take."

"It's because you're a nester, son." I gave it to him straight. "Bigfoot just naturally feels moved to make you the butt of a lot of jokes. He's a little peculiar in his rawhidin'."

"I'm a little peculiar, too," the Kid said, real quiet. "I don't like mice down my back or salt in my coffee or buffalo chips in my blankets or my saddle girth cut. Even if my paw is a nester."

"Bigfoot's a mean 'un and that's what you're up against all the way across the Territory," I told him. "Reckon he's a good trail foreman, else Mr. Carlson wouldn't have hired him. But—"

Mr. Carlson himself rode in just then, from the herd, and told me to quick fix him some grub from the leftovers. He

gave a sour look at the Kid, as if to ask what he was doing still loafing in camp. So the Kid said to me, "Thanks, Crip!" and rode off.

"That boy we hired at the Brazos," Mr. Carlson said, "what's his name again?"

"The Kid's all the name I recollect," I said. This gave me a chance to say something else. "Bigfoot's making the drive right miserable for him, Boss."

Mr. Carlson, who worried all the time about getting his first big longhorn drive through to market, chewed his grub and said nothing. After all, I was just the cook. If he'd wanted my advice he'd have asked it. I threw the rest of the stuff into the wagon, hitched the team, and got ready to pull north to hunt a night camp.

Just then Bigfoot Schmidt rode in, looking for Carlson.

"Figure if we push 'em till plumb dark," he reported, "we can clear a rock ridge about six miles north and bed 'em tonight on a big grassy flat up there. I scouted ahead this morning—you can see the flat from the ridge. Looks like a perfect beddin' down place."

Carlson said all right, and directly he and Bigfoot rode off.

Along toward sunset, I saw a rider loping my way from the drag. It turned out to be the Kid and I pulled up.

He wiped some drag dust off his face, pushed his hat back, and looked up to me in the wagon seat.

"Crip," he said, without beating around the bush, "we got trouble tonight. This herd's going to stampede!"

"Now that's right interesting," I commented, looking down at the Kid and seeing a hard glint in his eyes I'd not noticed before. "Ain't many nester kids able to look at a herd of two thousand longhorns two hours before dark and predict they'll stampede that night. You must come from a long line of fortune-tellers, son."

"It's not that," he said, worriedly. H

looked cautiously about. "It's—well, it's Bigfoot. He *smells*."

I knocked the ashes out of my corn-cob and took my time to figure that.

I said, "Lemme see, now—you say Bigfoot smells, and the cattle are going to stampede tonight? If it was smell, son, that did it, these critters would have stampeded long ago. Considerin' that the whole dang crew ain't had a bath since we left Santone. Maybe before that."

But the kid was dead serious. He said, "But this is Bigfoot's special kind of smell, Crip. It makes the cattle nervous. I got a sensitive nose. Every time Bigfoot rides up close among 'em, I can see it in their eyes—they get panicky. It's building up and it's going to be one thunderation of a stampede when they finally let go."

"And that'll happen tonight?" I prompted

"Yeah. They're about ready to bust loose. I'm warning you."

"Why warn me? I ain't got anything to do with it. Whyn't you tell Mr. Carlson that his trail foreman's gonna stink them longhorns into a wild sashay?"

"Why don't you tell him?" the Kid urged. "He wouldn't pay any attention to me."

With that, he whirled his mount and rode for his place on the drag. I picked up the lines thoughtful and clucked the team on toward the ridge.

Well, I would have put anything as far-fetched as that immediate out of my mind, except for the way the Kid had said it. I kept remembering how he looked. He was dead serious, and somehow he had made it convincing. I fidgeted, wondering what Bigfoot Schmidt would do if he knew the Kid was saying our foreman's smell was building up a stampede in those crazy longhorns. Even though I put no stock in it, the idea tickled me, thinking of Bigfoot smelling so strong that even the herd couldn't stand it.

Carlson came over to the wagon just

before I reached the ridge and it was near dark.

He told me about where to make camp and said they were going to push the herd on over the hump to the flats that Bigfoot had sighted that day.

I know I shouldn't have done it, but it just hit me and I said, "Boss, there's a little talk in camp. Nothing serious, but you ought to know about it."

Carlson was a nervous sort, always expecting trouble, and this was his first drive. He looked unhappy at once and asked what I meant.

I thought I might as well decorate it good.

"Bigfoot stinks," I said. "The hands are sayin' he's got a smell the cattle don't like. It's making the cattle fidgety. Some even predict we're gonna have a stampede."

Carlson pulled his ear and said, "Well I be damn!" He cut his eyes hard to me to see if I was dealing a windy.

I had on an expression as innocent as a little baby. Carlson pulled his ear again and then asked me, "Is that possible? I mean, you ever hear of a man's smell upsetting a herd? Don't know as I ever did."

"I dunno," I mumbled. "Longhorns are funny, especially when they're wild as these are, and out on the trail. I'm just telling you what some are sayin'."

Carlson frowned and shook his head and finally walked his horse back toward the herd. Soon as I got a chance, I pulled the wagon in close, until I could signal to Turkey Davis, riding flank.

"Turkey," I said, after looking over both shoulders, "guess what? Carlson has got the idea in his craw that Bigfoot Schmidt smells so bad the cattle are building up to run. You heard about it?"

Turkey was a gossip old boy who always tried to make himself look smarter than he was. That's why I picked him. He liked to pretend he knew everything ahead of anybody else.

He looked funny at me, then went wise-eyed as an owl. "Already heard about it, Crip," he nodded. "In fact, Carlson has consulted me on the problem. This is confidential, of course."

"Sure, Turkey—you can trust me."

He rode off looking solemn. Knowing Turkey, I would give the story about ten minutes to be all over the crew.

At suppertime, the men came in quieter than usual. Bigfoot showed up last. He said, "Well, they're bedded down mighty nice, Mr. Carlson—everything in good shape for the night."

Carlson nodded without too much enthusiasm. I watched him from where I worked at the cook fire. When Bigfoot turned his back, Carlson's chin went up a notch. He took a big sniff. Then he pulled his ear.

Charlie Sellers walked past Bigfoot. I saw Charlie hold his pipe out a distance, so as to make a fair test, I guess. He took a deep drag of air as he passed Bigfoot. Bigfoot turned his head just then and Charlie tried to change his smelling into a cough. Bigfoot looked puzzled. It might have struck him that all the hands had their eyes cut to him but pretending not to watch.

I was dying to know, myself. Curiosity was itching and soon as I had excuse I walked as close by Bigfoot as I could. I took a deep smell of him. Couldn't be sure—there were onions and beans and coffee competing on the fire. But before I could take tally on the results, Bigfoot grabbed my shoulder with a hand like a bear trap.

"What you think you smell, Crip?" His face was black and mad. He had caught on, even if he didn't know what it was about.

"Nothing," I said, innocent. "I just—"

"Well, don't come sniffin' around me—you nor nobody else." He glared about at the crew. They didn't meet his eye. The cook fire threw jumpy shadows on them and there was no sound but the flames eating the mesquite logs.

Bigfoot put his whiskered chin down

on his chest and took a couple of deep smells of himself. He looked mystified.

Camp was mostly silent through the late supper, with Bigfoot looking suspicious at every rider who moved. Mr. Carlson frowned, more worried than usual, and the rest of us were jumpy. Bigfoot finally put down his dirty plate, stood up, and looked around till his eyes fastened on the Kid. I guess Bigfoot wanted to change the feeling in the air—and the Kid had always been good for a laugh. So Bigfoot grinned jovial around at the other hands and spoke to the Kid, starting to build up a joke.

"Kid, I hear you nesters never eat nothing but jackrabbit stew—reckon this beef tastes mighty strange to a nester kid, don't it?"

But the Kid was picking up his saddle and blanket and lariat. He turned to us and said as solemnly as a Comanche chief: "I'm going on out to the horses and get saddled—that stampede's going to begin most any minute now."

The ugly word "stampede" lay before us like something you could touch. Mr. Carlson stood up. Bigfoot's mouth hung open.

I thought, Oh-oh, the Kid's over-done it. The herd had never been bedded down any quieter and there wasn't a chance on earth that this nester boy could call the turn like that on a run-away, whether Bigfoot's smell was agitating the critters or not.

Bigfoot said: "*Stampede?*"

The Kid was studying the stars as if calculating the hour.

"Yeah," he said. "Any minute now."

Bigfoot whirled to Carlson, then to the others.

"What's this stampede talk?" he growled.

Carlson cleared his throat as if trying to think of a way to say it to Bigfoot. The rest of us, whether we believed the big windy we'd built up or not, couldn't help but keep an ear cocked to the flats out there in the night.

And in that moment, we heard it.

At first, it was just a watery rustle of movement, like winds sending along a ripple of waves. Then I heard a deeper undercurrent, a rumble like thunder way off, and it built up fast and made your hair stand on end. Even while we stood froze in our tracks, the bawling broke loose like all the tormented souls in Hades. Then the cattle struck out.

There's no sound on earth like it—two thousand wild, panic-crazy longhorns on a run that no force could stop.

Bill Daley came yelling into camp, his horse on the run. "Come on—they're stampedin'!" Bill and Tex Sheridan had been riding night guard for the first watch.

The sounds then were like an awful storm. Everybody was running every which of way. The Kid was the first to get saddled, but there really wasn't much those riders could do. The herd by then was scattered to every direction and they would run till they collapsed.

It was two days later, and we were getting ready to pull north again for the Red River. The herd finally had been re-formed about five miles north-east of the flats where the stampede had started. It had taken the crew two days and nights of man-killing work to run 'em down and make up the herd again. Even then, we were short about a hundred head.

Bigfoot Schmidt didn't eat his breakfast till the other hands had rode out of camp. He was packed up, ready to go, and I guess there was nobody itching to tell him good-by.

He only whined to me, right sorrowful, as he mounted: "Seems like Mr. Carlson acted hasty, Crip—making Tex Sheridan foreman and sending me back home. Hell, I can't help it how I smell."

Far as I was concerned, it was good riddance, so I had no sympathy to give him. All I did, when he mounted and pulled out south, was to call him when he'd gone a little way. He turned to look back. I reached up and caught my nose and held it, as a final parting salute

for Bigfoot. For a second he looked mad enough to go for his gun, but I guess he saw I had the .30-.30 in handy reach against a wagon wheel. He kicked in his spurs. And that was the end of Bigfoot Schmidt.

The Kid, who was by then quite a distinguished figure in that crew, rode in to bring word from Tex Sheridan about our route for the day. He added, right proud, "They got me riding flank now, instead of drag."

"Kid," I said, "now that Bigfoot's gone and we got the cattle rounded up again—would you mind telling me, *did* you really smell Bigfoot and figure the cattle was building up to run?"

"Sure!" the Kid said serious.

"Come on, now—I been around cattle fifty years and I never heard of no one man having a smell that was so different it would start a stampede. What's got us all flabbergasted, is, you called the turn practically to the minute. We just can't figure out such hocus-pocus."

The Kid looked all around, then grinned at me.

"Well, just between us, Crip—I did know we'd have a stampede. Of course, I reckon I stretched it a little about Bigfoot causing it. But I was tired of his rawhidin' me and I just made that up, hoping it would tone him down a little."

"It sure did that all right—toned him down and got rid of him. A good day's work. But what I want to know, how did you figure the stampede?"

"Well, soon as I heard we were going to bed 'em beyond that ridge, on the flats, I knew we'd have a stampede. Bigfoot may know rawhidin' but I know this country. What happened to those longhorns that night was like what happened to me when Bigfoot dropped that mouse down my back. Reckon we'd have stampeded, too. Those flats, Crip, are plumb crawling at night and the herd couldn't stand it. That place is called Gopher Flats—and it's the biggest gopher town in Texas!"

TIMBER!

BOB, WHY CAN'T YOU
BE LIKE DAD'S MEN?
THEY'RE TOUGH WITH
TERRIFIC STAMINA!

GUESS I'LL
NEVER BE LIKE
THEM!

WHAT ALICE SEES
IN THAT GUY
I JUST DON'T
KNOW!

THAT DOES IT!
I'LL SHOW 'EM,
BUT HOW?

GEE! THIS IS IT! JUST WHAT I'M LOOKING
FOR -- 5 TERRIFIC BODY BUILDING
COURSES FOR ONLY 2/6.
I'LL WRITE TO-DAY.

TWO
WEEKS
LATER

WHO'S THAT? MUST BE THE CHIEF!
LOOK AT THOSE MUSCLES! HE'S
CHOPPING TREES LIKE FAGGOTS!

GOSH!
IT'S
BOB!

ALICE! COME HERE!
YOU'VE GOT YOURSELF
A MAN!

BOB!
YOU'RE
TELLING
ME!

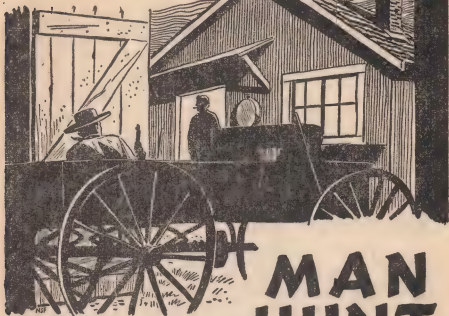
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Greenwood, Chief
Instructor, **BODY
SCULPTURE**

To George Greenwood, Chief In-
structor, **BODY SCULPTURE
CLUB**, Dept. P., Manor House,
Worcester Park, Surrey.
Dear George—Send my **FIVE** Test
Courses showing: (1) **HOW** to Sculpt-
ure a Manly Physique; (2) Double
My Strength in Thirty Days; (3) Be
Taller and Fighting Fit; (4) Gain
Weight where wanted, Fast; (5) Devel-
op Marathon Staying Power.
ALSO Free Club Membership. I en-
close 2/6 P.O. in **FULL PAYMENT
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Name
Address

CLUB, Dept. P, The Manor House, Worcester Park, Surrey.

He was just a drifting saddle-bum, not looking for trouble but not avoiding it either—till he signed on to kill a man.



MAN HUNT

BY
George C. Cippell

I WAS leaving the branding pen on my way to the corral when Lord Landon stepped quickly up behind me and rammed his gun into my back and pulled the trigger six times.

"Like that," he said. "I want you to give it to him like that."

I shoved his gun away and reached back and scratched my spine where the muzzle had hit into me. "I'll give him six," I said, "but not from the rear."

Lord Landon was loading his cylinder now, grinning down at it. He was a rangy man with a long, handsome face that never held a tan, and with slender fingers that were just as pale. So he was referred to as Lord, or as His

Lordship, because he reminded people of one of those Englishmen who ruled ranches from the distance of absentee-ownership, and who visited the West only when the mood suited them. Landon wasn't English, though, he merely looked English. His real name was Lester Landon and he came from up north, in Nebraska.

His gun was loaded now, and he

snugged it down into his holster and raised his grin to me. It was like a dead man's grin, waxy and cold. "I'm paying you to do this, so you'll do it my way." He slapped his holster. "In the back."

"I'm a professional gunfighter, Mr. Landon, not a murderer. There's a difference."

"Well"—he wasn't grinning any more—"just so long as you get him."

"I'll get him." I walked on toward the corral and he fell into step beside me. "It may take a week or more to hunt him down and smoke him out."

"I can wait." He motioned me to go into the corral ahead of him. "Sorry I can't offer you an extra horse, my stock's sort of worn out."

It was, too, and so was his ranch. Nobody rode for Lord Landon very long; he'd sign on some riders and put them to work, then they'd never be seen again. He'd hire another bunch, and the same thing would happen. Right now, I was the only hand he had, except for a cook. His ranges had been swept almost empty by rustlers, although that didn't put him in a special class because everybody's ranges had been raided recently.

Hoyt Bracken, Landon had told me. Hoyt Bracken was doing it, in order to scare his competitors into selling out, when he could snap up their land cheap and extend his own grazing. Had Bracken ever been raided? Landon asked. Only once, and that a piddling thing, a matter of fifty head. Who had lost the most? Landon, of course. So Bracken had to go.

I owned a deep-chested little sorrel that time, a sturdy horse with lots of endurance and plenty of speed. In my business, speed was frequently necessary; and I'd named the sorrel Flasher.

He wagged his ears as I swung up into the saddle, and I patted his shaven mane and drew back on the reins.

Lord Landon said, "They may know who you are, Chip. Bracken's hired every loose gun he could find to protect

his loot and himself, so be awfully careful."

"I'll worry about that." He was paying me plenty, after all, and I could afford to worry. That's how it happens in this business: one week you'll be drifting around, not looking for trouble but not avoiding it either; and the next week you'll be signed on to kill a man.

Landon still had something to say; he was standing on one foot and rubbing the back of his leg with his other foot, like a kid who's been caught stealing apples. Then he said, "Drop a letter off for me, will you?" He was grinning again.

"Sure." I backed Flasher around. "Where at?"

He looked like he might blush, though I knew he wouldn't. There wasn't that much blood in him. Besides, he was too hard-bitten to blush. He said, "At the dress shop in town."

That stopped me. If the letter was for a man, he'd have asked me to leave it at the saloon; but it must be for a woman, and the only woman in the dress shop was Mrs. Clutterho, who had hairy warts on her fat face.

He gave me the letter. The single word *Allie* was on the envelope, nothing else. I stuck it in my shirt pocket.

Landon said, "You get a bonus for this piece of work."

"I won't kill him until I'm sure of two things: that he's doing the rustling, and that he'll kill me for finding that out."

He whitened. "Hell, you got all the evidence you need. And as for him killing you—well, I told you to be careful."

I rode out through the gates and never looked back. I don't know what it was about Landon that made me dislike him so. Maybe it was his eyes, although it's hard to judge a man by that. Landon's were pale blue, with tiny black dots for pupils. Or maybe it was the way he shook hands: his palm was cold, with no strength to it. But it's not fair to judge a man by that, either.

Town was at the bottom of the mountain. They called it Bridger's Wells, because Jim Bridger had camped a wagon train there years before. The well had long since dried up, so they used creek water now. Creek water is much better than well water for men and horses, anyway. It's better for whisky, too; it brings out the flavor more.

I figured to have three, maybe four whiskies before my supper that night, and perhaps one after to kill the taste of the food. I'd eaten once before in Bridger's Wells, the day I signed on with Landon, and I couldn't forget it. There was a Chinese cook in the restaurant, a leftover from one of the Central Pacific work gangs, and he dragged everything through a salt barrel before he spit on it and fried it. Everyone said he spit on it, leastways, and I wasn't prepared to argue.

Flasher carried me down into the valley nicely enough, blowing and showing his teeth. I guess he was as happy as I was to leave Landon's place, it had more fleas than a kennel.

I looked around for trouble as I trotted into the street, but there didn't seem to be any. Some stable hacks were racked in front of the restaurant, switching their tails at flies.

About a dozen cow ponies were lined up at the saloon's tie-rail, pulling at their halter hitches and bumping into each other. I tied Flasher and went into the saloon.

It was crowded for that time of day, but not surprisingly so. After all, the outfits weren't hiring new hands, most of them were letting the old ones go, and there wasn't much work to be done. That condition had been created by the rustlers, of course, who had left few steers to be worked. So all the idle riders were wasting their time in town.

None of them greeted me. I was a Landon hand, and nobody liked Landon. I didn't see any Bracken riders, and I had to remind myself that Bracken's herds had barely been touched, and

that there was still plenty of work for his men.

I leaned against the bar and ordered barley. I was lighting a cigarette when I saw two men staring at me from a table toward the front. One was wearing a pie-crowned black hat, and had a fallow face that looked green in the brim shadow; the other was thickset and blond and had a checkered shirt that was trailworn and stained.

My nerves jumped, I don't know why, and I blew out the match and faced around to the barkeep. "Who're they?"

"Bracken's," was all he said. He said it in a whisper, too. Then he whispered, "You ought to come to town more often, so you'll learn."

"Yeah, I guess I ought to." I'd only worked for Landon about a week, and I'd been to Bridger's Wells once. I finished my drink and was ordering another when I remembered the letter. I walked out of the saloon, fishing the envelope from my shirt pocket, and headed toward the dress shop.

Passing the tie-rail, I paused to rub Flasher's nose and that's when I saw Pie-Crown and Checkered Shirt sauntering after me. I gave Flasher a shove and walked along the planking to the dress shop and went in. A bell tinkled.

Mrs. Clutterho was talking to someone behind the curtain at the rear, but the bell silenced her. She came through the curtain and blinked at me across her spectacles, fingering a pair of scissors she wore on a silver chain around her neck.

I touched my hatbrim. "Mrs. Clutterho? I have a letter I want to leave with you. It's from Lor—from Mr. Landon." I handed it across the counter to her.

"Oh yes." She held it close to her spectacles, then took a quick breath. "Oh yes." She glanced toward the curtain but she didn't say anything further, because the curtain parted and a young woman swaggered into the front room. She was wearing a ponyskin vest over

a light green blouse, and her legs were cased in blue Levi's. She was peart-looking—saucy, would be better—with a curve to her upper lip that told the world that nobody was better than she was.

Mrs. Clutterho said, "For you, Alice."

Alice snatched the envelope. I said, "It's from Mr. Landon."

She said, "Do you always repeat yourself?"

I said, "Thought you hadn't heard me."

Mrs. Clutterho said, "This is Alice Bracken." Then she blinked at me expectantly.

Sometimes, plump busybodies who try to cool rising tempers can do wondrous things. "Chip Lee," I said, and lifted my hat.

Alice Bracken measured me with a steady gray eye. "Any relation to the cook?" She broke the flap of the envelope with her thumb and snagged out the letter and flipped it open.

I thought, *Brat! Hoyt Bracken's daughter, most likely—and I've been hired to kill him.*

I said, "Any answer?"

She stared at me without warmth, but she didn't hold the pose long. She almost smiled. "No, thanks." She looked at me again, then went on reading the letter. She didn't seem to like whatever was in it, because her mouth was turning down at the corners.

Mrs. Clutterho was saying soothingly, "Allie comes in for a fitting sometimes and we have a cup of tea—"

But I didn't hear the end of it because I stepped out and shut the door. It was getting dark now, and lamps were being started. I walked toward the saloon with the idea of stabling Flasher and then having supper. But that was as far as the idea went, on account of a hard hand yanking me into the alley next to the hardware store and slamming me against the wall.

"Leave your guns alone," a quiet voice said. "We're four down on you."

The two of them had four guns between them, too. They were Pie-Crown and Checkered Shirt, I could see that much in the dusk. "Well?" I asked.

"Leave the Bracken girl alone," Pie-Crown said.

I had to grin. "You're out of your head, mister. All I did was deliver a letter—"

Checkered Shirt came close. "Just to make sure you leave her alone, stay off the Bracken ranges. . . . Got it?"

"Look, mister—"

"Here's a reminder."

And Pie-Crown belted me across the mouth with his open palm. My head banged against the alley wall and for a minute I blanked out. When I opened my eyes I was damned near sitting in the gravel and there was the taste of blood on my lips and my front teeth ached. Pie-Crown and Checkered Shirt were gone.

I had no hankering to be seen in public with a torn face, and I didn't want to crowd the play in town because I didn't have any friends there, and Pie-Crown and Checkered Shirt surely did.

So it would have to be open country for me, heading for Hoyt Bracken's range at night. I wanted to get a look at the man himself, because a lot can be learned by casing a man in his home surroundings. And since Bracken never left home unless he had to, I'd have to go to him, even though he wouldn't know I was there. I'd been told that he had a big spread with well-guarded fences, a place that since the raids had become like a fort. I didn't blame him, but at the same time it wasn't going to help me get near him. The only way I could figure to get over his fence was to fly.

I took Flasher off the tie-rail in front of the saloon and led him across to the livery stable. I turned him over to a man who was wearing a leather apron, and ordered oats.

The man had been greasing the axles of a light four-wheeler with empty shafts,

and when he rose he asked, "When'll you call for him?"

I started to say "Half an hour" but something made me stop. It was the sight of the four-wheeler. "Who owns the rig?"

"Miss Bracken," the liveryman said. He pulled Flasher across to the bins. "When did you say you'll want him?"

Suddenly I saw how I could fly over Bracken's fence. "Keep him overnight."

"That'll be two dollars."

I paid him, lighted a cigarette as casually as I could, and then ambled out into the street. Workless cow hands were tramping dust into the lamplight, calling to one another. The saloon doors flapped open, and so I faded into the darkened entryway of the post office. Pie-Crown and Checkered Shirt were coming across to the stable.

They struck up a conversation with the liveryman. "Nice sorrel."

"Yeah."

"Whose is it?"

"Don't know."

"You keepin' it long?"

"Overnight."

That ended the talk; the Bracken riders were satisfied that I wasn't going to leave town until the next day. Presently they re-crossed to the saloon and went in. I waited, cupping my cigarette in my palm, taking a drag only when no one was looking toward the entryway. After awhile I crushed the cigarette out, which was when I saw the liveryman walking away from the stable wearing a coat and hat but no leather apron. He'd fed Flasher and probably was going home for supper.

I slouched toward the alley beyond the post office, turned into it and strode down it. The back doors of the stable were wide open, and I went in. A single lamp was shining from the front, but the rest of the place was dark. So that it didn't require any particular caution on my part to climb into Alice Bracken's rig and curl up behind the seat with a blanket over me. The straw itched some,

but it wasn't bad. There was no chaff, so the danger of a sudden sneeze was reduced.

It seemed like all night before the liveryman came back and traced a team into the shafts, though actually it wasn't more than an hour. Pretty soon I heard Alice Bracken say, "How much?" The liveryman said, "Call it a dollar." She laughed and said, "Take two, times are bad all over."

She got in and lifted the whip; it squeaked in the socket. Then the sound of spurs entered the place, and Pie-Crown's voice said, "You want us to ride with you, Miss Alice?"

"I'll get there alone, Victor." The rig moved forward.

Checkered Shirt said, "Lee's stayin' in town tonight, so we better stay too an' keep an' eye on him."

Alice called, "Don't worry about me." The rig bumped out into the street.

I wondered if she was going to meet Lord Landon somewhere, in answer to that letter, or if she was going home.

Wherever she was heading, she was hurrying.

The rig kept hitting pot holes and ruts; the sound of the whip was steady and loud. Once we swung around a curve and I landed against the tailgate and my spurs shook. But she didn't hear them, she kept slashing the whip and talking up the team.

After awhile she slowed down, the whip stopped and the wheels turned more easy. I got the notion we were going up a grade—not a steep one like the kind that led to Landon's, but a shallow one with lots of turnings. That described the road to Bracken's.

On level ground, Alice whipped up the team again and we bounced for maybe another mile before I heard a challenge. She pulled in a little and called, "It's me, Ben!" and then used the whip some more.

Now we were on Hoyt Bracken's home range. We took two turnings around an S-curve, and then the whip

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hit into the socket. The rig stopped, and I heard Alice climb down.

A man's voice said, "Ah—es Señorita Alicia." He climbed up. "I stable heem for you."

"Thanks, Manuel."

The man called Manuel backed the rig around, turned it, jumped off and unharnessed the winded team. A lamp flared, then went out. I waited for what I thought was ten minutes before I lifted the edge of the blanket and looked around. The stable was dark, and I was alone. Through the open doors I saw the house, all lighted and warm.

Then the man I'd been hired by Landon to kill came to the back door and stood in it, smoking a cigar and eyeing the night. I recognized him from Landon's description: a big head on a big neck, white hair and white brows. As a target, he was such an easy shot that it would have been nothing to boast about, ever. And all around me were horses I could get away on.

But Hoyt Bracken was not a rustler, I knew that as I watched him. He was more the type that would save the ranges rather than plunder them; he had height and he had assurance, but he also had modesty. I was glad I'd come out for a look, and hadn't chosen to wait for him trailside in the darkness. And I was right glad that he'd chosen that time to come out for a smoke, and offer himself for my inspection, even though he knew nothing about it.

Rustlers don't stand in lighted doorways attracting attention with cigar smoke, and they don't have pianos either. This piano started suddenly, and Bracken turned toward it, smiling. I never liked piano music much, but this sounded different from the kind I'd heard in bars. Then Bracken went inside and closed the door.

All I had to do now was get next to the guilty man, and on my own terms—alone and not hurried.

I found a mare in a back stall and

threw a saddle on her and trotted out of the stable and rode directly onto the curving road that led toward the gates. I stopped several times, listening for running hooves behind me, but none came. Everyone was collected around Alice's piano, I guessed, singing the songs she was playing. It was lucky music for me.

Moonlight glinted on fencewire; a dark figure was astride the gate post, tracking me with a rifle. I called, "Hi—Ben?"

"Who is it?"

"I'm taking Manuel's place. Mr. Bracken sent me to town to tell Victor to come back in."

"Oh." Ben's rifle went down. "Go ahead." He had no idea who I was, but that spatter of familiar names had opened the gates. With Bracken keeping as many riders as he was, it was hard to know just who was on and who was off.

I trotted across the level stretch, then started down the grade at a walk. The time was about halfway between supper and midnight, and I figured to ride as far as the edge of town, slap the mare toward home and then bunk in the stable until morning.

It wouldn't be hard to shake off Pie-Crown, who was Victor, and Checkered Shirt, whose name I didn't know. I didn't think it would be hard, anyway. So at the edge of town I whacked the mare on her rump and sent her back toward Bracken's, and I trudged on into Bridger's Wells alone. The place was fairly deserted, with only the saloon light and the stable lamp showing.

I kept to the shadows, favoring the alley ends, and took a close look at the saloon tie-rail. It was empty. I crossed to the stable and had a look there, and it was empty except for Flasher. Which meant that Victor and Checkered Shirt were no longer in Bridger's Wells.

I slept in the hay loft over the stable, which was as good a bunk as any, and came down in the morning itching and

scratching. The liveryman came in and asked, pleasantly enough, "Did your friends find you?"

"My what?" I was slipping a bridle on Flasher, and I almost dropped it.

"Those two gents who stopped by here last night—the sickly-seemin' one and the blond feller—they were lookin' all over town for you. About eleven o'clock, they saddled up and left. Said they'd find you, b' God."

"They like to know where I am, at all times," I told him. "I drink too much."

I stepped into my saddle and rode into the street. It was full daylight now, bright and warm, and the town was awake and stirring. The swamper in the saloon threw a drunk out, tossed the man's hat onto his face, and went back into the saloon. Mrs. Clutterho, her parasol lifted against the sun, unlocked her dress shop and went in.

I booted Flasher up the mountain, riding slow. My hatband stung, my holsters were heavy and my knees ached. The trees hung green in the sunlight; the noise of the creek grew fainter as I rode higher, giving Flasher his head.

The timber thinned, the trail began to peter out, and I crossed rocky ground strewn with boulders. This is where I should have turned right toward Landon's, but for some reason I didn't. I sat there and looked around. Then I saw hoof marks going straight on. They'd been cut recently, too.

Flasher threw his head up and started to back, startled.

A shot smacked and a bullet burned past my jaw. I kicked Flasher up to the right and plunged for cover. Another shot went wide—because of my quick turning into a deadwood thicket.

Victor scrambled on foot behind a stony escarpment between me and Landon's; below, the way I'd come, was Checkered Shirt. I saw him dive into the timber. Now I was cut off from two sides, and I couldn't move in either direction. It wouldn't be long before

they got closer to the deadwood and began holing it with shots.

Flasher was calm now, he wagged his ears, dipped his neck and started cropping at grasses.

I remember thinking, Next time around this earth, I'm going to be a horse. . . .

When I touched my burnt jaw, my fingers came away bloody. A revolver had done that, not a rifle.

Gunsmoke fanned from the escarpment and a bullet whacked into a dead stump behind me. Flasher jerked his head up, snorting. I considered running for it, busting loose and charging hell-bent up the trail, emptying a gun at the thicket as I ran. But that didn't seem like a very good idea. I wanted to return to Lord Landon's on my own terms, alone and unhurried. I wondered if His Lordship could hear this shooting.

Checkered Shirt let go with two quick ones that dusted the ground above me. Flasher was about to come apart. His nostrils were fanned out and his eyes were rolling.

I threw myself flat and waited for Checkered Shirt to show himself again. The next shot came from the escarpment. I tried a shot at Victor, then put my attention back to the timber below. But Checkered Shirt must have moved, because no more firing came from down there.

I had a trick up my sleeve—rather, in my boots. I yanked them off and rose to one knee and took aim across the trail where the rocky ground fell away down a shoulder of the mountain. Then I swung the boots around my head and let go. They clunked one-two onto the rocks and banged and clattered downslope, spurs ringing.

"Get after him!" Victor yelled. "He's runnin' for it!"

Checkered Shirt popped into sight from the opposite side of the timber and sprinted across the trail toward the slope. I knocked him over with one shot and he toppled from sight. For

quite a few minutes I heard his body bumping and scraping as it slid into the ravine below.

Victor was the hunted now, not me. He had to watch three directions plus the deadwood, in case I made a break for it.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and hollered: "Victor!"

No answer.

So I tried again: "Victor!" Still no answer.

Perhaps he's changed position, I thought. I looked all around, but there was nothing but trees and rocks and, further down, thin timber.

"Flasher," I whispered, "flush him for me. I don't think he'll shoot at you unless I'm on you."

He didn't, either.

When I quirted Flasher and sent him busting down the trail toward town, Victor jumped into sight from the timber with his gun out, but he held fire when he noted the empty saddle.

I might have tagged him then, but I didn't want to risk a miss and show him where I was. So I ran like a rabbit instead, running up behind the escarpment. Victor's sweaty horse was on a peg, and I swung up and took the reins. But already Victor was dodging toward the escarpment from the timber. He was black-angry, not sallow green any more. He knew I wasn't in the deadwood, and he was coming back to get his horse and ride me to the ground.

Except that I was on his horse, and there wasn't room for two.

He fired first, and in his anger and eagerness, he missed, and then I fired. Then we both fired together, the sound of the guns racketing across the ravines, on and on.

He staggered backward, grabbing his stomach and gagging; and then he collapsed with his mouth open and his eyes open, still holding onto his stomach.

My left arm was numb where I'd been hit.

Pain struck, and for a moment my senses raced away, leaving me hanging onto the saddle horn, sick and shaking. Later, when I'd cleaned myself, I went to work on that arm, washing the wound with my tongue, like an animal, then binding it with strips of shirting. The throbbing ache beat up and down my whole left side.

I spurred Victor's horse over to where he lay and took a squint at him. He was a very pretty corpse, all laid out ready for the box.

Now I could return to Lord Landon's on my own terms, because I was certain now that Victor and Checkered Shirt, believing I'd shot Hoyt Bracken, had wanted to kill me in order to clear Landon of suspicion.

I rode on, and wasn't surprised to find a morral slung from each side of Victor's pommel, which meant that he'd been eating off the saddle and not planning to stop any place for long.

Well, he'd stay where he was for quite a while, with hunger the least of his problems.

His Lordship was sitting at his kitchen table cleaning his gun, his pale features gaunt with worry. But he managed one of those white smiles of his when I came in.

"Get him?" he wanted to know. "Shoot him in the back like I said?" He stood up, one hand straying toward the pile of cartridges next to his gun.

"Not in the back," I told him. "You wanted me to shoot him in the back because if I'd fired from the front, he would have seen me and might have lived to tell about it."

"Really?"

"And that would have led to you, unless Victor and his friend didn't ambush me." I rested my hands on my holsters. "They ambushed me, but they didn't finish in first place."

Landon was thumbing cartridges into his cylinder. "I don't think I understand."

"I'll help you." The ticking of the

clock was suddenly loud. "Why should Victor try to bag me if he was working for Hoyt Bracken? The answer is that although Bracken was paying them in good faith to guard his daughter, they were actually working for you as lookouts, so you'd know when to cut into Bracken's fence."

I was waiting for him to draw; I can't kill a man in cold blood. "What'd you write to Alice? A hint that you wanted to be invited to hear her play the piano—so that no one'd ever think that a man who was courting a girl would have her father shot?"

I'd never seen such hatred in any human face. He was lifting his gun now. The clock was ticking louder.

He said, "Thought I heard some firing a while ago." His gun was rising past his hip.

That's when I kicked the table against him and that's when we started shooting. Two bullets deflected through the woodwork into the wall and a third picked my hat off and scaled it across the floor. The explosions crashed into my ears and filled the room with dirty smoke.

Lord Landon sat down on the floor, coughing and spitting. I hadn't known until then that he had false teeth; I found out when he coughed them into his lap.

The cook came running, wild-eyed and panting; he took one look and ran, wild-eyed and panting, back the way he'd come. And then there sounded the steady drumming of many horses coming at the gallop. I went out into the yard and saw high-flying dust beating my way, filled with arm-flailing figures.

Hoyt Bracken was leading them. He spurred ahead of his riders and drew back hard on his reins and threw off with his soaked horse between himself and me. But he didn't need that barricade.

I slung my empty gun into the kitchen and walked toward him, the stones chewing into my stockinged feet. "He's

in there, still alive, to know what it's really like to get hurt."

Bracken signaled to his men to surround the place and go in. He still wasn't trusting me, and how could I blame him?

Bracken blurted, "That your horse?"

"Yeah—he got away from me down the trail."

Hoyt Bracken came booting around past his own animal and approached me. "We found the two bodies. The thing that got us started was that mare of mine coming back empty early this morning. We rode to Bridger's Wells, and there was a commotion about your sorrel, there, coming in empty an hour after you'd left. And that brought us here."

Men were emerging from the kitchen with their guns held toward me. Two of them were carrying Lord Landon on a splintered shutter.

I said to Hoyt Bracken, "I was supposed to deal you out, and then the two bodies down the trail were supposed to deal me out, which would have put the guilt on you and left Landon clear."

"How'd you find out that he wasn't clear?"

"In the branding pen, beyond the corral over there. A couple of days ago I found the broken wires that His Lordship's riders used on their running irons to fake road brands onto the rustled stock. My guess is that he'd hire a bunch, swing a rustle, send the bunch south with the herd, then hire another bunch to do the same thing on another range. That way, nobody could recognize anybody else, there was no evidence on the hoof, and there couldn't be much pursuit because every rustle followed a different route, and they all came so fast that nobody wanted to go very far from home."

Bracken spun his gun once or twice. "If that's so"—his eye drifted to the men who were down on me—"where are the rustled herds now?"

"Off-hand, I'd say in the Trinity

bottoms. They're unfenced, it's open range, and any steer that's in them is the property of the man who happens to be nearest. Landon was probably planning to send for 'em after all you folks were sold out and moved away. . . . Please holster your gun, Mr. Bracken, it makes me nervous."

He hesitated a moment, weighing the weapon in his hand. Then he saw my stockinged feet and my torn, crusted shirt and my bare head. "You're one helluva sorry sight."

"Fortunes of war, I'll be all right."

He motioned the men to put their guns away. "What war?" He himself holstered. A little grin was forming on his mouth.

"Cattlemen versus rustlers, for lack of a better name."

"That one's good enough." His glance was quizzical. "I filed a complaint with Cattlemen's Protective two weeks ago, as spokesman for the range. We're all in business together, and what's bad for others will, ultimately, be bad for me. We can't afford to have our stock plundered. . . . The Association said

it'd send a man." His grin spread. "Why didn't he report to me?"

"Because you hadn't lost much—fifty head." I fished for the makings and drew them out. "The thing to do is go to the man who's lost the most—like Landon, at the same time keeping your mouth shut." I rolled the cigarette. "You learn more."

"I guess you do," Hoyt Bracken said. He snapped a sulphur match alight and held it to my cigarette. "You'd better come over to my place now, and get some new gear." He blew out the match. "Do you like piano music?"

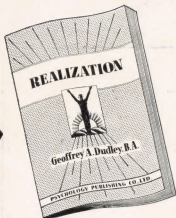
"It depends," I told him, "on where I hear it. Besides, I've got a buggy ride to thank her for."

His grin sank to a hard line. "I beg your pardon?"

I didn't explain right away, I don't like to be hurried. I was judging this land, figuring its future. I knew it pretty well—I'd just hunted over it—and I reckoned it'd be a nice place to settle down someday.

Even with piano music, which I've come to like very much lately.





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